

S1 — Episode 3 — Teaching about Gender in Middle School

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Tara interviews the team behind the documentary film *Gender is Like an Ocean* about their work on teaching middle school students about gender with the novel *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* written by Kirstin Cronn-Mills in 2012.

Tara: Hello, and welcome to Gender Sexuality School. I am Tara Goldstein and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. In 2016, a group of students from Delta Sr, Alternative School and Master of Teaching students studying to become teachers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, read the book, *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*, which was written by Kirstin Cronn-Mills in 2012. *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* is a novel about 18 year old Gabe Williams, who has recently transitioned and is learning to become a guy. The students from Delta, and new teachers from OISE, work together to create arts-based projects in response to the issues of gender raised by the book. Their work was documented in a film called *Gender is Like an Ocean*. Today on Gender Sexuality School, Professor Rob Simon and two members of his research team, Benjamin Lee Hicks and Ty Walkland are here to talk about their project. Rob, Benjamin and Ty. Welcome to Gender. Sexuality. School.

Rob: Well, thank you for having us, Tara, it's a pleasure to be in conversation with you. *Gender is Like an Ocean* documents a year in the life of a collaborative research project that we call the addressing injustices project. The basis of this is to explore the question, what happens when teachers and students, in this case, talk about gender together, and the ways that they might express their understandings of gender or other social justice issues, through the arts and co-research that process. I've been working with our close colleague, a teacher at Delta Alternative, named Sarah Evis for about five or six years now. And each year, we take up social justice issues that are expressed in a young adult novel and use that as a starting point for inquiry. And then really sort of see where teachers and kids take that in their work. So, the film shows some of that work, but not all of it. But we're very proud of it. And it is available online. If anyone would care to see it at, GenderisLikeanOcean.com.

Tara: Thank you. Thanks so much. So Benjamin and Ty. We'll start with Benjamin first, while you're conducting this study, what kinds of things did you notice? What kinds of things did you find out?

Benjamin: Well, a lot of my sort of specific work with the, with this project was with Master of Teaching Students. And I worked with everyone in general, but my master's thesis was part my, part of my data question occurred during this process. So, I think I can probably speak more to things that we noticed with the MT students and then Ty can take it from there maybe. So

specifically, I was really interested in the question of, of what happens for teachers like cognitively and emotionally in the decision-making space between like learning about and perhaps even becoming, like, passionate about issues of systemic oppression, that directly affects students and colleagues, and then like them entering their own classrooms and, and deciding to do something or not do something with that information. And so, I was particularly interested in the dynamic of that, and of talking about and learning about gender diversity in relation to elementary schools, right. So that's kind of the idea that I went in with. And then so I worked with the MT students partially about how they felt personally in relation to their own life experiences of transitions and change. And for some of them, I worked with them for about 18 months. So, after our initial project was done. And so, I talked to them, those students particularly a lot about how they were taking that information into their lives after OISE and potentially into teaching as well. So, one of the most interesting things that I found from that was they— they all had very similar responses to what they would, what they would need in order to take that information. And what they talked about is like actively using it or, or we talked about is like queering the space in the school, taking that information, and making it useful to all of their students. And so, the first thing was that they felt like they needed to engage in a much slower process, of personal inquiry about the topic. And they also felt like they needed the assurance that their colleagues would support them in that process, especially as young teachers. And so, in short, like they became invested in the imperative of the work, but they were, they felt like they were exposed to supportive collegial communities so briefly that they didn't feel comfortable addressing it in their classroom. So, a lot of them said very honestly, like, I believe in this now, but I'm not going to do it because I don't feel like there is the ongoing support out there for me to— to do it sustainably. And the last thing, I guess, around that is that they— they all said in some way or another that they mainly felt unprepared due to the complexity of their own feelings, like being aware that they, that they had feelings about this, that it wasn't simple, both socially and like the way they were brought up and the way they thought now and that they could work that out. But they needed time to do that. And it wasn't about a lack of factual information. And so, I guess in conclusion for that, is that it really got me thinking about the way that we do teacher education, both initially and ongoing, around social justice issues. It's often like a one-off workshop, right? And that doesn't allow for any of the things that they're asking for.

Tara: It's so interesting, because in spite of the fact that they had involvement in this project, and they could see the students engaging with the book, and they could see how powerful the pedagogical experience was for the kids, when it came to them being able to think about doing such work themselves, they, they just didn't think they were ready.

benjamin: Yeah. And they had very, like, thoughtful responses to that. And it wasn't, it wasn't a case, often it wasn't the case of, "Oh, I'm never going to do that", no, it's just like, I am aware that like I need to work this out. And we don't, I don't think, as teacher educators and people doing policy and stuff, often, we want things to go faster, right? And then the reality is that this work can be done, and it can be done sustainably. But— but not unless we expand our ideas of like, what the time and space for teacher education is. And like whether it's an emotional process or not, which I don't think we give a lot of time to.

Tara: Right. Right. I'm going to turn to Ty now to ask a little bit about what you observed about the students. And when they were working through their ideas for their projects based on the novel, and then I'll turn to Robin, ask him to add anything else he wants to about what he noticed. So, Ty, first to you. Yeah.

Ty: Yeah. It's interesting, as benjamin was talking, I thought about how, in some ways what, because we have an intergenerational project, we're in this interesting moment where we get to see people of all different ages sort of take up the same issue. Right. And, you know, we're, we're, benjamin noticed, and we noticed that a lot of our teachers were having hesitation or, you know, feeling a lot of uncertainty, and uncertainty in a way that could be immobilizing at times, the young people were just running with this, there wasn't hesitation, there was a deep dive in, you know, and in some ways, there's a moment in the film where another of our colleagues, Belta Douglas, she says that the kids were in some ways more on top of this conversation than we were. Because a lot of the teachers came in, one of the first activities that we do is just having a conversation on paper about some gathering some of our impressions and some of our understandings around gender and around the novel. And the teachers were blown away by the fact that the students had already been thinking very deeply and very critically about the ways that they are gendered. The ways that those systems have shaped how they understand themselves, and that they were very keyed into that. And so, for them, there really wasn't the same kind of hesitation, they took some of those ideas and ran with them. In the film, you're— there is a, there's a short film within the film, actually, that one group of students produced. And this was their way of writing back to what they saw as being some kind of stereotypical portrayals of cisgender women in the novel. And for them, you know, it wasn't just a matter of like, you know, here's this book, and now I understand something about what it might be to be transgender. For them, it was like, here's this book, and this book is actually relying on the same problematic tropes of a binary or binarized system of gender. And we're not having it, you know, we're gonna bust it all up. And that's what really what they did. And Rob actually often, you know, reminds us to really take a believing stance with young people and to recognize their capacities. And so, you know, I don't want to fall into that trap of saying, "Oh, my goodness, how shocking that young people know things!" But in some ways, that's

what we learned, you know, we learned that young--that, that we can really trust young people to-- to really, to dive deep and to be really thoughtful and that they actually they bring a lot to the table already, you know, before the invitation's offered. I think something else that we learned too is that the work does really extend far beyond the classroom, you know, or OISE, you know, the buildings that we do all this work in. Again, in the film, our teaching colleague, Sarah, she talks about one student in particular who, who came out through the process of doing this work. We know because we've been in conversation with other kids that this has impacted how they understand themselves. We, you know, there have been other kids who have been exploring what it might mean to, to think of their gender more fluidly, to think of, and there-- and therefore, to think how they relate to other people in that system, and in different ways, and to really support one another in something that's quite special.

Tara: Just before you go on, can you remind me: how old were the students who you're working with?

Ty: These are grade 8 students. So, this is gr-- these are 12, 13, maybe 14, at most, year old students, you know, these are 13-year-olds.

Tara: So, we're living in a moment now, where there are lots of discussions about what's appropriate, to teach about, to talk about, with children in elementary school, whether it's in terms of gender or sexuality. Given your experience on this book, what would you say, to contribute to those conversations?

Ty: Well, I mean, I think what's appropriate is what students are already talking about and what students themselves are already comfortable discussing, and what they're already asking, you know, so I mean, a lot of the, again, a lot of the push and the discomfort and the dis-ease actually comes from adults who are making a lot of assumptions about what students need, what students already know. And this idea of appropriateness, or you know, what can and cannot be talked about. The truth of the matter is that students are thinking about these things, students are already identifying themselves, within either a binary gender system, or outside of that, you know, one of the groups of students, for example, produced videos for a YouTube channel where they were talking about the many different ways that people can identify themselves across the gender spectrum. And those are conversations they were already having before we brought in a book about a trans character. So, I think that, you know, the concern around appropriateness is that the students kind of set the-- they set the tone for those conversations. And, and a lot of the time the anxiety rests with adults.

Tara: Thank you. Rob, anything you wanted to add to what Benjamin and Ty have already said about the way folks engaged with the— with the novel and the projects that the students developed. Maybe you could talk a little bit about the teacher who was involved and what you think she noticed about her students and the project?

Rob: Yeah, thanks, Tara. I think one, one thing that I would say I'm reminded of this, often by Benjamin, who talks about the importance of queering space in classrooms, that we are dealing with a text with queer content. But there are some very traditional ways you might treat a text with queer content. And then you might imagine, we could take— take a book like *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*, and ask kids to do chapter quizzes, or write a five, five paragraph theme about that text, but inviting them to really disrupt some of the normative structures, and relationships in classrooms, that really is, I think, it adds this sort of different dimension and creates space for them to bring themselves more fully into conversations, to draw upon their— their questions and their own kind of organic, and already developed critical perspectives on the world around them, to feel listened to and valued and to listen and learn from others. It also involves I think, for— for us as teachers and researchers, and for my students who are learning to teach in a teacher education program, it means sort of working against our disbelief in students' capacities to take those kinds of leads in our conversations, not just to understand it, and maybe take in some of the content, but actually do a bit of the teaching themselves, as well as maybe our own ability to kind of let go of what it is we think we should be doing at any given moment in a class, which is something I might remind my students of, but it's definitely something that I feel and experience often in the course of this project, you know, that I have to let go of some of my expectation that as a teacher educator, my job is to fill my students with certain kinds of core competencies or knowledge or something that they need, you know, we, we have these sort of layer deficit perspectives. You know, Paulo Freire calls it a banking model, we always think that we have to fill people up with some things that they need from us, when really, we need to create the conditions for them to learn together, and to do their own learning and to do a bit of teaching of us as well. So, from the perspective of Sarah, yes, you know, our teacher partner, we are extraordinarily fortunate that Sarah works in the context of a school that has a kind of flexible curriculum structure. So, for the— the young people in our project, this really is a part of the curriculum that you know, they're getting credit for and being assessed on in their classrooms. For my students, this is the section of the class where they might be doing novel study, right? Learning about developing curriculum. I just feel like kids are maybe better teachers than we are sometimes. So, we've invited the— the youngest teacher-educators in Canada, grade eight students to come in and really help us to understand, you know, what it means to take up really pressing really important social issues in classrooms. And our sense is that new teachers, well, as you— you know, Benjamin mentioned, it is— it can be a

struggle, that that struggle of productively complicating what it is we think we know or should be doing is a healthy one.

Tara: Thank you. So now that the three of you have completed the project, what advice do you have for teachers who want to use novels like *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* or other novels that deal with issues of gender and transition? Are there any issues that teachers need to be prepared to take up with their students? How might teachers prepare themselves? What kind of work do teachers need to do? And Benjamin would you like to start us off?

Benjamin: Sure. Yeah, I was, I was thinking of lots more little bits, as both Rob and Ty were talking. But I think one of the things that I think that we try to do during the project, especially like, as we've presented this work across the US and across Canada, right, knowing that policies and laws and like political ideas are very different in different locations. So, we want to be able to have this work, talk to teachers in a way that they feel like they can do, regardless of their situation. And so, I guess some of the more general things, you know, building on what Ty was saying before about looking at what, to what kids bring, is that kids ask the questions that they're ready to hear the answers to, right. And so, one of the things I always like to do is, is ask kids questions about their questions, because often we as adults, we project an idea that is usually based on our worst fear, right? Well, we're gonna have to answer as to what, what a kid is asking, right? So, you know, I use this example, often with teacher education is like, you know, I get asked all the time, are you a boy or girl? Well, that is going to mean a very different thing to like, five different six-year-olds than it is going to mean to potentially like a high school student or something, it's not necessarily going to be inappropriate in any of those contexts, and usually isn't right, right. Like specifically, like, "can you tell me more about your question", tells you as a teacher while you're answering, right, and it might be something as easily as disrupting the idea that like, boys can wear nail polish, right, and have nothing to do with the things we're talking about. But in terms of like, different locations for this work to be done, I guess, like my biggest piece of advice for teachers, and it's sort of a call to responsibility in some way, right. Like to know, I feel like it's our job as teachers to know not just our rights as educators, but our responsibility and like, to our students, based on the human rights codes in the area that we live in. So like an Ontario, for example, our Human Rights Code has no age of minority, right, which means that our first responsibility is to children and what they choose for themselves and their identity, when they might want to be called, what pronoun they want to use before even what their— what their parents feel like they should use like that, that is actually the right of that child, right. And regardless of what our provincial government says, that we can or cannot talk about that, the Human Rights Code trumps that, right. And so, it's just important for us to know, especially in these times, like all of the— all of our rights as— as adults and our responsibilities to kids, because that, that I think helps assuage some of that fear

when you have the language, legal or otherwise, to talk back to any potential problems. But basically, just like, last thing, I guess, the last thing I'll say around that, you know, you mentioned the idea of appropriateness, which is idea that's thrown around a lot, which just like feels like a stab in the gut all the time frankly, it's just to know that like, regardless of anything, queer and trans people are in education and have been in education since time immemorial. And so, when you talk, like not you, but like when people talk about what's appropriate, it's important to know that we're here at all ages, right? And so that idea, even to like to have that word in our vernacular, it erases whole people and communities.

Tara: Thank you. Ty, advice for teachers?

Ty: Yeah. I'm going to return to something I mentioned earlier, which is this idea, kind of Rob's idea around this believing stance. And for me in the context of this work specifically, that means believing that kids are coming from a loving place. And that might sound a little pat. But, you know, I've been doing equity work for a number of years, and I've done a lot of work that's been framed as sort of anti-homophobia, anti-transphobia. And some of the moves in that work is to, is to go into classrooms and go into educational spaces and kind of assume that the people in there are coming from a hateful place, and then our job is to school them out of their hate. And, you know, what we learned, I think, in this project in the same way that we could have, we could have offered this, this novel, instead of the children, you know, now that you're reading about this, this trans character, this person who identifies as transgender, now we're going to convert you from you know, your, your, it's a, it's kind of a variation on the banking model, but it's like now we're going to fill you up with a with a love that was not there. I think if we trust that students, generally they're doing the best they can maybe this is just broader life advice, but that people are generally doing the best they can. That people generally are not in the business of trying to hate other people. And not assuming that the work of supporting and advocating on behalf of folks who are on the LGBTQ spectrum, that that work isn't just about erasing hate, but that work is about surfacing the real love that's already in the room, that's already in the spaces. And that we you know, a lot of the time, it's not about, we need to teach people to not bully, to not use these words, to be kinder. That's certainly maybe part of the work. But I'm a little concerned that that is often the starting point. And what's exciting to me about this work is that the starting point is about, oh, people are already experiencing these things. And they are generally coming from a place of love, and kind of trusting that that's what's going on.

Tara: Thank you, Ty. Rob, advice for teachers?

Rob: Advice for teachers, I think, in these times, educators are really wondering what the place is for critical social justice work in classrooms and feels to me that it's needed now more than ever, right? I think some of the most vulnerable members of our communities, in our classrooms in, in our world are under attack, by a rise in populist nationalist politics in Canada and the US; across Europe. And the work that we're doing, I think, for teachers, they need to make space for addressing issues in the world that are very pressing and matter to them. And to the kids, and the kids' communities that they're experiencing and not shy away from that. I think a piece of that is making space to know their students, right, to build curriculum from their lives. I think very often teachers believe their teaching subjects and particularly as they move forward in the in years or you know, secondary classrooms, for example, they're very concerned with modelling themselves after their favourite university instructor. So, I teach many students who want to be English teachers, and they might have a love of Shakespeare or love literature, and they think that's the thing that they're teaching in class. But they're always teaching people, right, not texts, the texts are merely sort of a space, or a starting point for a conversation. So, you really have to make room in your teaching for those people to come together. And to, and to do some critical and meaningful work. I think from, from a critical literacy or critical pedagogy perspective, it's important for teachers to remember that empowerment is not a transitive verb, right? No one empowers other people, right? Um, you know, I think about our feminist forebears like Elizabeth Ellsworth and others who reminded some of you know, folks doing important work and critical pedagogy, mostly white males, that maybe their work didn't quite feel as empowering to them and their students as was intended, and our job as critical educators is not to colonize people, right, with our ideas, but to really create the conditions for them to empower themselves in whatever way is meaningful to them. I think it involves risk. I think that it involves letting go. But ultimately, I think that involves the possibility or creates the possibility for some really important things to happen, and change, and not just on an individual level, but we hope at a broader, broader social level as well.

Tara: Rob, Benjamin and Ty. Thanks so much for joining us. I loved hearing about your project and the ways that teachers and students engage with the issues raised in *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*. You can view the documentary film, *Gender is Like an Ocean*, at addressinginjustices.com: *Gender is Like an Ocean*. The password is "music". Rob Simon is an associate professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. His *addressing injustices* project explores what happens when kids and teachers work together to address social justices through readings, writing and artmaking. Benjamin Lee Hicks is a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Their main research focus is Teacher Education in relation to trans identities and queering school space. Ty Laughlin is a high school teacher and PhD student, also at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, where his research focuses on collaborative inquiry and educational labour. That's our podcast for today. If you have any

burning questions about gender, sexuality, and school, send an email to info@LGBTQfamiliespeakout.ca with the subject line "Ask gender sexuality school". In future podcasts, I'll take listeners' questions about issues of gender and sexuality at school and try to answer them with the help of some amazing folks who have been thinking about gender and sexuality for a while. You can find this podcast at WWW.LGBTQfamiliespeakout.ca. This episode was produced with the support of the New College Initiative Fund, and from Helgi Audarson Gudmundson, who is a Master of Education student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Thanks to LGBTQ Families Speakout team member Kate Reid, sound engineer Lisa Patterson, musician Doug Friesen for creating the music that opens and closes the show. I am Tara Goldstein. All the best.