

S1 — Episode 5 — What Parents Want

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Tara talks to colleagues Tania Ferfolja and Jackie Ullman about their Australian research about parents' views on gender and sexuality education.

Tara: Hello, and welcome to Gender Sexuality School. I'm Tara Goldstein and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Last November, I travelled to Melbourne, Australia to work with my colleagues from Western Sydney University, Tania Ferfolja and Jackie Ullman. Tania and Jackie are working on a project similar to the LGBTQ families speak out project. They're researching parents' perceptions of the inclusion and exclusion of gender and sexuality diversity education, in K to 12 public schools in Australia. Today, on Gender Sexuality School, Tanya and Jackie talk about the early findings from their research. Tonya and Jackie, welcome to Gender Sexuality School. Can you tell us about the goals of your current research and the research questions you are asking and answering in the study?

Tania: To have some understanding, really, of what parents want in schools. We don't really know in Australia, what parents want in relation to gender and sexuality diversity, because there's been no large-scale studies, you know, around that topic. So, we're really keen to hear about what parents want, and then be able to pass that information on to various departments of education and curriculum authorities so that they can, you know, tailor the curriculum, I guess, to parental needs. We're also quite interested in understanding what, what are the needs of parents? And what are their experiences, I guess, of parents of gender and sexuality diverse young people, right? Because we really don't know how they are managing to navigate the school system for, for their children. So that's another key kind of area that we're looking at.

Tara: Excellent. Jackie, do you want to add anything?

Jackie: We do know that there's a significant variation in how gender and sexuality diversity is addressed or not addressed in schools, that, you know, of course, there's variation that has factors such as school, state-based policy. But also, you know, there's so much variation just based on really individual microcultures of schools themselves, school leadership, and even teachers' own ideas about the topics, the fears they may have. So, because of this variation, we really want to get a sense of where sort of pockets, you know, of support, and perhaps pockets of, of less support, or more resistance may lie. And with regards to the experiences of parents of kids who, who identify as gender and sexuality diverse, we're really curious about the diversity of their experiences with schools. And I know that you're going to ask us more about this later. But I'll just say that, you know, we know from others' research in the area that there

is quite a lot of diversity, and that that diversity has pretty significant outcomes for the kids who are involved. And we're interested in exploring kind of the features of the different schools, right. And kind of, you know, what might be causing that from the parents' perspective.

Tara: Excellent. In Australia, can you talk to us a little bit about how the curriculum works? I think you told me there was a national curriculum, but states also have some say in what curriculum looks like, how does that work?

Jackie: So, some years ago, now, I think maybe 2014, I think, was the sort of commencement of the rollout of the Australian National Curriculum. But so, there are eight states and territories across Australia. Now, I don't know the exact sort of ins and outs of how various state government organized education, government organizations negotiated this, but I do know that the way that the curriculum is enacted in some states is more direct. So, they work, they work from the national curriculum, and that's sort of directly kind of implemented into their schools, whereas other states have a bit more flexibility to add or refine or massage as per their own state policy directives and interest I suppose. So, so yeah, so it's interesting, we have a national curriculum kind of in name. But then there's flexibility there and ultimately, as we know, you know, these documents are just you know, they just provide the skeleton, the person again, yes, and that you know, schools and teachers kind of flesh that out as they see fit regardless of what the policies state, so.

Tania: Yeah, just add too, that, you know, in terms of gender and sexuality diversity that would generally fall under the PDHP syllabus or –

Jackie: Physical health education.

Tania: Yeah, basically. So, you know, on some level, it's kind of limiting in terms of how it might be approached by schools and by teachers. Right?

Tara: Now, you're telling me that there are two components, perhaps even more than two, to the study, there's a quantitative survey that you're developing. And some interviewing, the qualitative part. So, I'm going to ask Jackie to talk about the survey, and Tania to talk about the qualitative aspects of your study. A mixed method study has a lot of potential to do different things, I think. What are you hoping for each part?

Jackie: We will be running a national survey of parents of kids who are in school. So, for us, that's kindergarten through to Year 12. National Survey of parents who specifically send their kids to public or government schools. In the main, we wanted to have sort of focused kind of

starting point where we felt that we could really make the biggest kind of, we can agitate the most, I suppose, using that kind of a focus. So, this national, what we hope to gain by this is some of the points that Tania was making earlier, which is that we really just don't know what parents think by and large. In Australia, we've had some recent controversies slash moral panics, you know about what might happen to the children if we include gender and sexuality diversity in schooling. And you know, that it's evidence of some sort of radical political agenda. And while those voices have been very loud, and very dominating, we don't really have any way of knowing right now just how widespread those opinions are. And we'd like to know, you know, we'd like to know, because we want to be able to work with parents around the fears that they may have, or the anxieties they may have as well as support parents who are interested in seeing this kind of education included for a variety of reasons, personal, political, social, for all the above. So, the national survey will be rolled out through targeted advertising using social media. And we intend to get as much as possible a representative sample of parents from across the country, asking them specifically about what they sort of foresee, like when they envision gender and sexuality diversity in education. What does that mean for them? What would be the curricular inclusions? Where would that curriculum sit? When do they think that would be appropriate to include? And for us, most importantly, for what reasons? You know, why? Why would they like to see this be included? And for people who are more sort of resistant or anxious about those inclusions, why are they resistant? Why are they anxious, not to exclude those individuals, because obviously, we have our own opinions on how these to be included. But, but to be able to engage in conversation with those communities and those individuals. And we think that these findings will really enable us to do that.

Tara: Wonderful. So, let's hear about the qualitative part of this study.

Tania: So, the qualitative part, really, there's two components to it, and it's still very early days, we have just started this research. So, part of it will be looking at the experiences of engaging with the school schooling system, I guess, for parents of gender and sexuality diverse children. Okay. So, we are hoping to get a discussion board going for parents who are interested in participating around that, but also enabling them to engage with, you know, perhaps resources that we find, or community groups that we find to support them as well. So, getting bigger, but ultimately getting the input, into what's happening for them, and their child or children. But the other part of that is to look, undertake semi structured interviews with the same what were these parents as well, too, and they, their parents of children in state schools, as Jackie said, and I think part of the reason that this is really important is because they're basically obliged to abide by the anti-discrimination law in Australia. Right. So, you know, what is it that state schools are doing? Or how are they operating around these experiences to young people? So, in light of those anti-discrimination laws, so I guess, at this point, you know, we've interviewed a

handful of parents, and, you know, the findings. I mean, what we are finding is a mixture in terms of the experiences of these kids raised in schools and their parents, so which, you know, range from quite positive, you know, the school was great, they had everything kind of, like, lined up, you know, they were very open. You know, they offer lots of diversity, education for the kids, they support various supportive days, you know, those kinds of things to schools that basically just closed down and haven't done a lot and had actually, in some instances been what we would term obstruction. So, it's, you know, as I said, very early days. But there, there's sort of the range of findings is already apparent to us, I think, at this point. Very interesting. Did you want to add something to that, Jackie?

Jackie: You know, some of what we're finding is absolutely consistent with other work in the area, which is to say that, you know, even in schools where a particular teacher might be very supportive, and, and has that child's back and has the back of the family and wants to engage with them around this and wants to do what they can to support those kids and their family. The school leadership, who sets the tone for the school is ultimately the pivot point. So we are finding that, yeah, like I said, you know, families who are having supportive experiences with the classroom teacher, for example, if at the end of the day, if the school leadership is not willing to actually bring these conversations into the school, at a whole school level, or work directly with the parents in terms of actually active communication and regular communication around what's going on for the child, then it's all it's all gonna fall down, it is fallen down for some of these families. So, I think that's a really important point to stress. And it'll be interesting to see how much that's replicated and further, you know, research with these families, but it isn't surprising in the sense that it already has come out in other research in the field, that the school leadership is really, you know, setting the tone.

Tania: The tone of the school, it really depends on whether the child can stay at that school, dependant on the tone. And but some people, you know, some parents who had actually gone to private institutions with their kids are finding that more is on offer. And again, you know, depends on which school that may be, but you know, more progressive forward-thinking schools, perhaps, but then you have parents who are actually, they just can't afford to pay that. So, there's already a social justice issue, even operating there, I think in terms of, well, what you can afford and what you can't afford, and how, you know, what that means in terms of what you can offer for your kid, your child. So, yeah.

Tara: So, based on these early findings, do you have any advice for teachers who want to do gender and sexuality diversity education, and any advice for school leaders who may not have engaged in this work, but want to do well by their LGBTQ students and their families?

Tania: I think one of the important things that teachers need to do is they need to educate themselves, or find sources of education around if they don't, if they don't feel confident, because I think a lot of the issues for teachers is that they don't feel confident, they don't know where to go. So self-education or finding, you know, opportunity to get more information is really critical. Engaging with external community-based groups, or, you know, places like family planning that can actually offer support is also a good idea. I think that there is no point in just putting posters up around a school, right? You know, you need to go further than that, you need to actually educate the school community as well, more broadly. And you know, in that, I think, too, it could even be bringing in like community members or like, parents, okay, so this, what I'm thinking, to talk about the diversity in gender and sexuality. And I think, you know, change, it's even at that sort of very small level of what you can actually do in your classroom, you know, behind closed doors or whatever, you know, affirmations and inclusion around a whole range of diversities is really critical. Kids need to be able to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and reflected in what you're doing. And, you know, kids can read your attitude, you know, so I think it's really important for teachers to be really supportive to ensure that all kids have a voice in, in the classroom.

Tara: Jackie?

Jackie: I would say two things. One, that I think it's important for teachers to familiarize themselves with the policies that exist in their local areas. And I say this, because even if the policy is and we do this in our own work with preservice teachers, even if the policy in the curriculum alludes to this area of diversity in vague ways, what it will always do nowadays will always do will always mention affirmation of diversity that will always be present. Right. Right. And will also always be present is prioritizing student well-being. And I think under those two banners, this fits. Absolutely. Right. You know, so, so, you know, knowing kind of having the that information under your belt, you know, as a bit of sort of armour if you like, or perhaps ammunition, you know, that if your work is challenged, that might make new teachers in particular feel less afraid of doing it if they do have fears, you know, and I think that those teachers' fears are real and I think they are potentially, depending on where they're located, really, you know, well based out those fears, sadly, because of the prominence of some of these resistant voices. But I think if teachers are familiar with the policies in place in their areas, and having that kind of at the ready, then all of the supportive work is, is very clearly all towards that goal of duty of care to students and making sure that they're able to reach their absolute educational potential, which is always in every teacher and student's and family's best interest. The other thing I would say, specifically with regards to the experience of transitioning kids, is that there isn't, there doesn't, even in our preliminary work, there's no one size fits all solution, there may be policies in our state, we do have policies in place, but those policies kind of, you

know, are meant to say, here's the roadmap for how to do this. But in actuality, you know, if this, if the school and the teacher can be led by the child and lead by the family, you know, assuming that the family is on board, led by the child and what the child wants, in terms of that process of transition, and knowing that that's not going to be the same for each child, I think that's really important to keep in mind too, that open mind that even though policy may attempt to be well meaning or attempt to make the experience more visible, allowing the child to lead the process, I think, is really, really important. And that may not take the same shape for every experience. It's what you do in your classroom can have a ripple effect across the board. So, I think, you know, that that's, you know, for people who aren't confident, or who need to learn more about the issues, you know, just starting with very small things in your classroom can make a difference to some to, to a child or to their family.

Tara: Can you give us an example of one or two things teachers can do?

Tania: Oh, look, I mean, you know, like I'm using, you know, they're doing some work around family, for example. So, they might have picture books that are have, you know, inclusive, you know, gender and sexuality of his parents or, you know, or children so that there's a visual, you know, and you can do that with very, very young children. Yes, you know, including, if you're going to, if you're talking about Mother's Day, you know, it might be something like including everyone's mothers, plural, you know, it's not just, you know, it's extending out and acknowledging that it's not just going to be Mum and Dad, there's quite often, you know, it's broader than that, you know, it's much bigger than that.

Jackie: And I would also say that where there are opportunities for new examples, just being aware of, well, the potential bias that exists in resources, so checking resources carefully for that, and, you know, obviously not choosing the resources that seem to be quite heteronormative. But I'm kind of working more mindfully to embed resources that themselves are inclusive, and, you know, if you're working with, you know, character study, or you're working with a study of historical figures, or you're working with, you know, any number of areas, you know, to bring in that diversity in a mindful way, because perhaps the resources just haven't caught up to that yet. So, it may be teachers' work to actually do that, go that extra mile to be quite mindful about that.

Tania: You know, sometimes schools are quite strapped for resources, they don't have a lot available. So, they have to work with what they've got. And those resources might be quite heterosexist, right. So, there's opportunity there for teachers to actually use that as a, you know, a teachable moment, I guess, around these kinds of issues. So okay, you're sort of

obliged, on some level to use resources that are available, but how can you deconstruct what's happening in those resources with your students?

Tara: Excellent, Tanya, and Jackie, thanks so much for joining us. All right. 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 a future podcast, 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've been thinking about gender and sexuality for a while. You can find this podcast at WWW.LGBTQfamiliespeakout.ca. This episode was produced with 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 the LGBTQ Families Speak out member Kate Reid, sound engineer Lisa Patterson, and musician Doug Friesen for creating the music that opens and closes the show. I'm Tara Goldstein. All the best.