

## **S1 — Episode 6 — Queer is My Family**

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Tara talks to team member Pam Baer about her applied theatre research with young people living in LGBTQ families.

Tara: Hello and welcome to Gender Sexuality School. I'm Tara Goldstein and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. In November, LGBTQ Families Speak out team member Kate Reid discussed her research about using songs to do gender and sexuality education at school. Today on Gender Sexuality School, another LGBTQ Families Speak out team member, Pam Baer, is here to talk about her applied theatre research with kids living in LGBTQ families. Pam, welcome to Gender. Sexuality. School.

Pam: Thanks, Tara.

Tara: It's great to have you here.

Pam: I'm excited to be here.

Tara: Wonderful. So, Pam, can you tell us a little bit about the goals of your thesis research and the research questions you're asking and answering in your study?

Pam: Absolutely. Um, so my research, it really stemmed from a deeply personal place. When I, when I first wrote my proposal, my partner was pregnant with our first child, I had so many questions and fears about what it meant to raise a child in a queer family. How would we navigate homophobia and heteronormativity? How would we as queer parents protect this innocent precious little being we chose to create? It was, it was an unknown time in my life, as it is for anybody about to become a parent. But for me, you know, it was, there was these—these added layers of nervousness and unknowingness. So as an academic and as an artist, I turned to research to try to answer my questions. And I think the hope was that I would alleviate some of my fears, you know, like, find some answers, always with the answers. If I have answers I can get through it. But yeah, so that's how I kind of decided to engage young people with LGBTQ parents in a three-day art making workshop.

Tara: Fantastic. And what were your research questions at the time?

Pam: Well, we use theatre, puppetry, song writing, poetry, book making, dance, all sorts of art forms to kind of explore their experiences. So, the art provided a container in which the young people could tell their stories, understand, and reflect on their experiences, and then begin to

advocate for change. And so, as an applied theatre artist, I'm interested in how we can use art to engage in anti-oppression education. And as a queer parent, I'm interested in how we can do better, how we can learn from past experiences and kind of work towards a better future for the youngest and most vulnerable members of our community.

Tara: Wonderful. So, I know you're analysing your data right now. But while you're conducting the study, what kinds of things did you begin to find out? What did you begin to discover?

Pam: I think that, most notably, I re-discovered the power of art, both to tell a story, but also to break down barriers. There's a vulnerability that is needed in order to create art together. And I found that things such as movement helps us find that – a vulnerable place where we could kind of tell our stories, where we could be heard and witnessed and validated in our experiences. That in being vulnerable together, these young people were able to create openings for new beginnings. I understand. Yeah. So they were able to kind of figure out how things could be different, reflect on their experience, and I don't know, anticipate how they could work towards change in the future.

Tara: Is there an example that stands out?

Pam: Well, I think that one of the big things I, in terms of, kind of, their experience that really spoke to me is that kids from queer and trans families, they, they're looking for a really different type of recognition than they were 10 years ago, right? We used to want to be recognized as the same, right? We'd hear these– these– these– that hear people saying our family's just like yours, or love makes a family. A lot of the children's books that were written at that time are all about normalizing families, right? It's kind of a heteronormative framework of what is family or how we define family. And so, the kids I worked with, were just like, our feelings are different. And that's what makes us special. They didn't want to be put into some box or labelled in some way or, or viewed as, as the same as everybody else because they wanted their, their difference to be recognized. And so, you know, they figure everybody's different in some way. And this is just one of the ways that they're different. So, everybody should just get over it. Like they were very vocal in their desire for folks to get over it. Right. They worked with Kate Reid who you interviewed last time. She came in and did a little song writing workshop. And so, the kids were able to write a song all about their experiences and what they wanted people to know about their families. So, the chorus went like this, okay? "Don't judge how our families love, because you can't choose who you love. Don't judge how our families connect, we all deserve a little respect. Because difference is a good thing. And yes, my family is different. I said difference is a great thing. We're all different in our own way." So originally, they had wanted that end line to say, "and you are different, too", to really like point

to the listener and say, everybody's different. But I think that ultimately, they just want to celebrate difference. And I think that that, that is really powerful. It is a really powerful takeaway and a really powerful kind of transition in where we're at in terms— in terms of recognizing LGBTQ families. So, since we're gonna be talking about a song, I'm gonna read you the last verse, which was written by a 10 year old participant, and she said this. “We refuse to conform to your ridiculous standards. We don't have to love certain people, love certain things and follow gender stereotypes. Queer isn't a choice. Queer is my family.”

Children singing: We refuse to conform to a ridiculous standard. We don't have to love certain people, love certain things, to follow gender stereotypes. Queer isn't a choice. Queer is my family. Woo!

Kate Reid singing: Don't judge our family's love, 'cause you can't choose who you love. Don't judge how our families connect, we all deserve a little respect. 'Cause difference is a good thing. And yes, my family's different, I said difference is a great thing. We're all different in our own way. There we go, don't judge our family's love, 'cause you can't choose who you love...  
(repeats)

Tara: So, Pam, now that the data collection is over, you have a song, and you're analysing and writing up your findings. Based on some of the things that we talked about, what advice do you have for teachers who want to queer their curriculum through applied theatre?

Pam: Well, so I've been thinking about this question. And I think that we often think about gender and sexuality as something that we need to address in high school, right. And what I'm seeing in my research is that grade five was the turning point for these kids. It was when they were being bullied, okay, family formations, being called out on gender norms, being asked to explain themselves and their families over and over and over again, right, there was kind of that feeling of, "Ugh, I have to do this again". And that they had to always start at the beginning, they had to explain, you know, how they were conceived and how their family came to look like what it looked like, every time they encountered someone new. And, and there is almost an exhaustion with that, right? So, kids, kids, you know, middle school kids, elementary, like later in elementary school kids are at an age where they're discovering their independence. They're engaging in identity formation, and they're exerting their power and trying to establish norms. So, I think that this means as educators, we have to get to them before that, right. To borrow the words from one of our participants in the LGBTQ Families Speak out project, we have to start the work at the beginning. Exactly. You know, we need to engage with conversations about LGBTQ identities before the bullying starts. All of my students have been bullied about their family formation. We can't just react to it afterwards, there has to be that prevention. We

need to establish different norms in our schools, in our minds, and in our hearts that include a diverse set of identities and experiences. These are conversations that have to find their way into elementary schools, regardless of who is in your class, right? Don't wait for the queer and trans parents to come to you to read books with queer and trans characters, right? Find a way to queer your curriculum for all students, for the ones who will come up when they are older, right? For the ones who have aunts who are lesbians or grandparents that are trans, right? You know, you don't know everything about your students, you don't know their whole story you may think you do, because you know them and their immediate family in this moment. And I think that what we need to do is we need to create space that allows them to tell us their story. Because if you take the time to create that space, I think you're going to be amazed at the diversity of knowledge and experience that really young kids can bring to the classroom. So, I think art making is one of the ways to do this. Yes, like, I'm an artist, I think creating together creates openings for storytelling and experience sharing. But it's not the only way. So, my advice to educators is find it, figure out what makes sense for you and your classroom and your students. Because it's going to make all the difference in the world to a young person who has never seen themselves reflected in curricular materials or classroom conversations. And it's going to contribute to a wider understanding for all students so that when they do get to grade four, grade five, grade six, and they're figuring out who they are and what that means, they have a wide range of possibilities. Right? If we work to create openings, we're going to be amazed at how our students fill them.

Tara: I think that last point is incredibly important because we did talk to families who had children who transitioned as early as grade one. So, this idea that certain conversations need to wait until kids are older would have done nothing to support the young, the young trans girl who was transitioning in grade one.

Pam: Exactly, exactly.

Tara: Excellent. Pam, thanks so much for joining us. We loved hearing about your project and the way you've used art to queer the curriculum. In the classroom, outside the classroom. Pam Baer is a theatre and media artist who focuses on community engaged work. Pam has facilitated community-based projects with diverse groups in England, Ghana, and Canada. Her current work focuses on LGBTQ families, stories, and representations. It explores the role of collective creation and participatory media in social justice education. Pam is a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Recent directing credits include *Queering Family*, *The Story of Us Part Four*, which screened at Toronto Short Film Festival in 2016, *Casto and Sylvie*, stage at the summerworks Festival in 2015, and *Creating our Families*, LGBTQ Encounters with Fertility Clinics. This premiered at the Gladstone hotel, by the LGBTQ Parenting

Network, also in 2015. 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](mailto: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](http://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 the LGBTQ Families Speak out team 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.