

S1 — Episode 9 — Queering Sex Education

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Tara talks to LGBTQ Families Speak Out team member Bishop Owis about her research on ways to queer sex education so that it represents the lives of LGBTQ students.

Please note that Bishop Owis was formerly known as Yasmin. They now use Bishop exclusively.

Tara: Hello, and welcome to Gender Sexuality school. I'm Tara Goldstein and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Today on Gender Sexuality school, LGBTQ family speakout team member Bishop Owis is here to talk about a research study she did for her Master of Teaching Research Project. Bishop's study explores teachers' perceptions and practices of challenging heteronormativity when teaching sex education. The main goal of the research was to illustrate how individual teaching practices can create equitable learning spaces for LGBTQ+ students in sex ed classes. Bishop, welcome to Gender Sexuality School.

Bishop: Hey, thank you. Happy to be here.

Tara: So glad to have you here. So, Bishop, can you tell us about the goals of your thesis research and the research questions you were asking? And the questions you are answering in your study?

Bishop: Yeah, so I wanted to explore what the common practice is that teachers use to really challenge the heteronormative discussions in content and sex education. So, the major goal of the research paper was to see how teachers include discussions of queer and trans identities into their sex ed classes, but also really to find out what practical methods teachers are using in their classrooms so that other teachers can follow suit and inform their practice.

Tara: When you talk about hetero normative sex ed, what are the kinds of things that you're thinking about? What, what is it about our current sex ed programs or curriculums that make them heteronormative?

Bishop: Yeah, so definitely the content that is being covered. The, the current curriculum doesn't cover any topics related to queer, trans identities, right? Let alone safe sex practices for them, or discussions about sexual orientation, or gender identity, gender expression, and there's a lot of missed opportunities, I think, for discussions about nuances. So how intersectionality plays out. So, if you're, if you identify as racialized or as able bodied or not, like there's, there's, there's no room in the curriculum right now for discussions on queer and trans identities, but definitely related to intersectional issues as well, I think.

Tara: Fantastic. So back to your research questions. What were your research questions?

Bishop: Yeah. So, my research questions were, how do teachers' perceptions and practices of teaching queer and trans sex education influence their, their pedagogy? Okay, so I really wanted to find out some practical steps on how teachers can include queer and trans identities into the, their teachings, so that way, you can really inform other, other teachers, something very practical, something very tangible. Yeah, I think it turned out well.

Tara: Fantastic. So what did you find out?

Bishop: Yeah so, there were there's lots of things that came out of the study, I think, and some of the major findings were that the teachers really wanted to create possibility models for their students. And they did that by using UDL. So that stands for Universal Design for Learning. And, and using UDL ultimately help teachers to reach all of their students, regardless of if their identities were queer, or trans or straight, or cis, like providing information for their students that can help and inform all of them, regardless of their identities, or where they are in their sexual health journey. And doing that ultimately created like safety for students at all stages, regardless of where they're at in their, their development. So, I imagined it as like a box. And that box, like a cardboard box, that just dictates kind of the direction that sex education is in right now. And that box is very heteronormative, very cisnormative. And the current sex education only show students the box, it's like here, here it is. Inclusive sex education. So, I think things that teachers are trying to do, it kind of looks like tokenism, or surface level inclusions. And it was, that looks like teachers, showing their students the box, but also taking out what's inside the box and saying like, look, here it is, and like I've included you, whereas inclusive sex education for queer and trans students lets them take the things out of the box, and then provide it for them and then let them choose based on where they're at in their lives. And that type of like learning that includes everyone, and that allows students to guide the direction of their studies of their, of their sexual health journey is, is something that a lot of the teachers talked about in the study. Yeah, and I mean, teachers also talked about wanting to "queer", as a verb, their educational spaces. And they did that, I think through a bunch of different ways. But one of the ways that they do this was explicitly, explicitly including queer and trans content, into their, into their teachings, because they were aware that it was missing. A lot of the people I interviewed were activists in their own educational settings, and leaders within the school. So, they felt really confident with wanting to include that in their, their lessons.

Tara: Could you give us an example of what including a trans positive sex ed activity would look like? Does it have to do with the language that folks use when they're talking about sex ed? Or does it have to do with pronoun use? What are some of the things that need to change?

Bishop: I think I, it's hard, I'm, I don't identify as trans so it's hard to see, like what like trans students need, and I think that's part of the direction that sex education needs to go in is that students need to be the ones informing their teachers what they need, because those identities are extremely intersectional, and nuanced. And if we say like, I'm going to cover queer and trans content, in my, in my teachings, and you kind of prescribed like this one, kind of like definition of what it means to include that, then you're still not really reaching the students that, that need it the most. And I feel like a lot of the sex education that currently exists is— does focus very much on like, language, and, and pronoun use. And, and it's, I think it's fine as a starting point, to say like, this is what it means to be trans. And this is what it means to be, you know, bisexual and whatnot. And I think as a starting ground, that's, that's a great place to start. But I think the problem begins when we say like, "look, I did it, I included it". And like, you kind of leave it at that, because that's not in-depth enough.

Tara: So, I'm going back to your metaphor of the box, right, and having a whole bunch of possibilities in the box and taking them out for students to engage with what makes sense for them. So is what you're saying, in terms of having a range of choices, teachers really need to let students direct them in terms of what they need; that curriculum piece for teachers is to figure out ways to have students tell them what they want to know.

Bishop: Yeah, and I think that was that was absolutely the biggest finding of this study is that teachers need to be co-constructing knowledge and lessons and activities with their students as opposed to for their students. And then I think having that kind of invitational educational setting where we're inviting our students to be an active participant in their education, not only creates like this buy-in type of energy, where they feel like they have a stake in their education, but also means that those nuanced intersectional identities are going to be represented. And that is going to change every year, depending on your class, right? Because, like, you know, you might have different identities one year, and then a whole different set the next year. And if you're just doing like, this one prescribed, kind of like queer sex ed, that's still not necessarily even enough. Yeah, and so like, a lot of the teachers, like in the study talked about wanting to, to not be the kind of teacher who stands up there and is like, "I know everything, I'm gonna, like, you know, just tell you it and like this is how it is". They really wanted to create environments where they were co learning with their students and listening to like their students and their needs, and really having this very collaborative process. And I think that again, speaks back to the the UDL aspect of it, that Universal Design for Learning, where if we're

creating equitable spaces, we're listening to our students. And that information can ultimately reach everyone in the classroom regardless of, of who they are and what they identify as and where they're at in their life. But I think it's interesting because there's actually like, like very, like shockingly like very little research on what, what that looks like actually in practice in a classroom. There's a lot of research that says that it's needed and that it's something to be explored but nothing that really actually says what happens when when you actually include your students in discussions of queer and trans sex ed. So, I think that's hopefully where the where the future lies and including, you know, having inclusive environments for queer and trans students in sex ed. Yeah.

Tara: Fantastic. So what's next for you? Bishop, what are some of your plans?

Bishop: Well, I'm finishing my, my program, right now. I'm a Master's of Teaching student, which is exciting, so I'll graduate with my with my teaching degree, and hopefully, still be able to continue practicing and supplying as much as I can. And I was also just accepted to the Ph. D. program at OISE in the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning department. So that's extremely exciting. And I'm still very much in shock about it. And so, I'm, I think that that missing piece that I just talked about, about wanting to create collaborative environments for students is something that I'm, I'm wanting and willing to research. And I really hope that like the research that I've done here, and that I'll do in the future can inform teacher practice and, and create equitable environments for the students most at risk.

Tara: Fantastic, Bishop, thanks so much for joining us. I loved hearing about your research on sex education, and how teachers need to challenge heteronormative practices in their classroom by queering their sex education classes. I'm going to look forward to the next part of your research program, which will give us concrete examples of what that might look like. Bishop Owis is a second year Master's of Teaching student of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, where she is involved with the institute's Gay Straight Alliance, Queer at OISE. Alright, that's our podcast for today. If you have any burning questions about gender or sexuality in 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 Doug Friesen who is a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Thanks to LGBTQ Families Speakout team member Kate Reid, sound engineer Lisa Patterson, and musicians Doug Freisen, for creating the music that opens and closes the show. I'm Tara Goldstein. All the best.