

## **S2 — Episode 1 — Creating Queer and Trans Cultural Spaces at School**

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*Tara talks to j wallace skelton about j's work with OISE's teacher discussion group Queer and Trans Space and the discussions teachers are having about implementing the 2019 sex ed curriculum in their classrooms.*

Tara: Hello, and welcome to Gender. Sexuality. School. I'm Tara Goldstein, and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Today we are interviewing PhD student, j skelton wallace from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education OISE about their work with a group called Queer and Trans Space, which provides opportunities for OISE students to discuss queer issues and identities in schools. j, welcome to Gender. Sexuality. School.

j: Thank you.

Tara: Great to have you here. To begin our podcast, can you tell us a little bit about yourself, your educational work and your research at OISE.

j: I am a third-year student in the Ph. D. program. No, a fourth-year student! September, so change these things. I am in Curriculum Teaching and Learning. And I'm working on a project thinking about how might young children and their caregivers reimagine earlier spaces as queer and trans positive spaces, actually, even as queer and trans cultural spaces and what could that be like, feel like and look like? So that's my research work. Outside of OISE, I have worked both with the TDSB and the Halton District School Board around gender and sexuality and sexual orientation. I work on publishing *Flamenco Rampant* with my husband, which are feminist LGBTQ positive children's books, which came out of my master's project and a desire to see more of those in the world. And I parent to three small humans, one, one larger human these days and two small humans.

Tara: Fantastic. So, in some ways, it seems to me that queer and trans space at OISE is an attempt to develop a queer and trans cultural space in the way that you are researching. So, I understand that you had your first meeting at the Master of Teacher orientation in the first week of September. And now I hear that you've had two more meetings for a total of three and we're only mid-September. How did these meetings go? What plans do you have for the group this year?

j: So, Bishop and I have been really thinking about this as a joint project. And last year, it was really intended for queer and trans students, this year, we've said, this is open to anyone who wants to be part of these conversations, we are not going to scan your identifications at the door. But we want it to be a space that centres the needs and views of queer and trans people, or anyone who is other than cis, cissexual, and anyone who's other than heterosexual. We had a great meeting the first week, we had quite a large crew of people, and wanted to, in that first week, create an open space to say, what are your questions as you're arriving? A lot of the people attending are new to Toronto, new to the MT program, and really thinking about, where is my community? What does this look like here? And what might happen to me in my placements in schools? Where's the room at OISE to have conversations

about sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression? Because this matters to me. Moving forward, we're going for two lunchtime meetings a week. Not a week, sorry, a month, and one evening, and the evening is both about accessibility, because not all OISE students are here during the day, and as folks head out to practicums, that they've got some possibility. I will also say, I feel really conscious about making room for queer and trans joy and enthusiasm, as well as for issues. And people have said they want work around policy. They want to connect with the archives, which is the external archives of LGBTQ2IQQQA materials in Toronto. But we've talked about going to Buddies in Bad Times and seeing some theatre, right? What are things that people who are interested in education and these conversations and education might enjoy? As well as how do we support people doing this work in schools?

Tara: That sounds wonderful. You mentioned a partner in this work, Bishop. This is Bishop Owis. Tell me a little bit about how you imagine working together.

j: So, Bishop and I have very exuberant conversations and lots of say to each other. We come with some really different identities, right? That's really important. It is about both of us have some paid time towards this work. So, acknowledge that. But I have more paid time than Bishop, because she's splitting time elsewhere. I want to say, so, she's fabulous. This is not about a lack of fabulousness. So, I'm going to take on the admin tasks, I'm going to try to then facilitate in partnership with each other. It means that I think about what does it mean to be a white person in that space and not take up too much room. And I know that Bishop is thinking about what does it mean to be a cis person in that space and not take up too much room. And both of us sort of keep that in the forefront. And that's, that's making a really nice partnership with each other.

Tara: Fantastic. What are some of the things that folks said that they want to do in that space?

j: I mean, people are thinking about what are the realities in schools, right? People want to know what they actually can and can't say, right? The province of Ontario has had enough political muddying of what can people say around what is considered Health and Human Development in the curriculum. What can people say elsewhere? We had folks who've been told in schools, you can't talk about sexual orientation before grade three, you can't talk about gender identity before grade eight. So sometimes people are saying, what does that mean? How much of me do I leave outside the school building? How do I do that? How does that harm students? Others wanted access to... Where's research? Where is writing? How do we talk about this as important? People have said, like, who are the queer and trans folks at OISE in terms of faculty, and how do we connect with them? Where are the courses where this will be, you know, not just a subtopic, in week eight, but actually a focus of the work we're doing. But also, people who are saying, you know, we are queer and trans people who are engaging and creating education and curriculum in lots of places, how do we do that with each other? And recognizing that many people feel like they are the only one in their cohorts? What does it mean to do the work of being the only one to remind people that queer and trans students exist, that homophobia and transphobia exists, whether or not there's queer and trans students, and that everyone has to be doing the work of making space and ending oppression all the time. And not just because they see someone there.

Tara: One of the things you talked about was this particular political moment we're in where there is a curriculum that has suggestions about when it's appropriate to talk about sexuality, sexual orientation, and, and gender identity and gender expression. But we all know if you're going to create a queer and trans cultural space from day one, in order to serve all of the students and all the families and schools, that won't work. What are some of the things that you've talked about, about how teachers working in this political moment, can negotiate to create the spaces that your group is and that needs to happen in schools?

j: I mean, I, I take a lot of guidance from the Human Rights Code, right. And particularly the protections around sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, sex, are not age specific, right? So, it feels really important to say students of all ages have a right to be free from discrimination on these topics. And if you're talking about heterosexuality, it is discriminatory to not talk about any other possibility. If you are talking about sex, and you're talking about boys and girls, it is discriminatory to not talk about any other possibilities. So, I actually think that we have a legal obligation to do this work, and to do it at all ages. I hear a lot of people saying, you know, but it's not developmentally appropriate, right. And I will say, my academic work these days thinking about early years, I understand developmentally appropriate practice as a particular type of thinking, that doesn't talk about sexual development at all. And so, if you're looking at developmentally appropriate practice, this is never included within that. And so, I think we have to say that it has left things out, and that developmentally appropriate practice becomes a framework to exclude, rather than one that we have to work with. I think about my own four-year-old, right, who when he was two said, bubba, I a cis person. And it sounds a little funny, but when you have two trans parents and a non-binary older sibling, maybe you do as a two-year-old need to come out as cis. But he absolutely knew what he was saying and felt very clear about it. And so, it feels like if you can introduce children to the language, if you can scaffold their learning, yes, this is absolutely something they're capable of. And, and it was important for him to talk about his identity. Yes. And you know, "Great, thanks for telling me". But I think we get really stuck in this imagine needing to wait. Right? I also would say, students arrive in our schools with all of these identities themselves and in their families, right. And we cannot be telling children, you know, don't— don't talk about your family at school, it will upset the other kids to know that you have two mums. Just don't say it. Because that's very much discriminatory, particularly when other children are talking about their families. And so again, we need to be doing the explicit work of saying, we welcome hearing about your family, who's in your family? Who loves you, who cares for you? How many homes does your family live in? Yes, acknowledging that not all families live in the same home. You know, when we ask children to draw their family, we need to be ready for kids to say, you know, all my family fits on one piece of paper, or, actually, I need to add more, right? I think we need to be ready to say to kids, what are the words you use for the people in your family? And write them down? In my city in the project that I'm working with the city, a lot of parents have said, you know, my kid had a mom and a mommy. And they— you, my kid knew who we were until they went to daycare. And now we're both mom. Mm hmm. Because day care couldn't keep track. Right? And I sort of want to push back and say it's not that day care couldn't keep track, but day care didn't keep track. And how do we hold people accountable to say, if a child has a mom and a mommy, knowing who's who is important to that family unit. You can't just sort of

homogenize all women are mom, right? Or in any other family unit. So, I think this work is always important. I think it's always there. I frequently remind teachers that particularly in the TDSB, the Toronto District School Board, because we're in Toronto, right, that both school board policy, and the unions policy supports this work. If your employer and your union agree on something, that's significant backing, right, I think it is hard for folks in the MT program, because as associate teachers, right, they're not part of the Union, the employer is not their employer. And so, these two significant protections that are available to people who are actually teaching aren't available to our students as they go into schools to learn to become teachers, right. And that gives them a heightened sense of vulnerability.

Tara: That makes total sense. Before we start to close up, I wanted to ask you, you were talking a little bit about the last meeting where you brought in a whole bunch of picture books around a range of gender and sexual identities. And you talk to me a little bit about what it was like to share those books with the folks that were there. Would you tell us a little bit more about that, that sounded so exciting.

j: I love children's picture books. I encounter folks who want to know what books they can use, in primary and junior, on a sort of ongoing basis. And I have collected a lot of those books myself. So, I've got about 300 that deal with gender diversity, and then a larger, a larger collection that deals with sexual orientation. And I brought in a suitcase and a table. It's really important to me that there be books that are about kids of colour and written by people of colour. Because a lot of books available, sort of in the mainstream categories are either about white kids, or they're about animals, right. And there's this, to me really upsetting trend that publishing seems more comfortable with animals than with kids of colour and authors of colour. And I add that too, because a lot of books that are about kids of colour are written by white people. And I want people to encounter books that are authentic, that are people talking about their own cultural locations and identities. I also have learned, if I say to a teacher, "use this one book", some teachers will feel that's great. Some teachers won't be able to find it and so won't do it because they can't find the book. And other teachers will feel like, why are you giving me this book, right? If I can bring in a literal suitcase. So, they're stacks of books, and say, take a look at them and figure out what you like it lets someone use their professional judgment and think about what would fit in their classroom. And so, it's not about "I have to use this one book", but it's about "what appeals to me, what could I share with my students and be enthusiastic about and enjoy with them?" It also lets me talk about, "what's the story?", and I want to say having two same sex parents isn't a story. It's a setting, maybe. Yeah, but it's not a story. Having characters, having two same sex parents who get married. We have a lot of books about marriage. Kids are less interested in marriage than the grownups are, right? How do we find books where it's not a bully narrative, where it's not ... this child was identified as being too feminine for their role and so got bullied, got bullied, got bullied, got bullied, whoop, somebody said it was okay at the end. Isn't that great? Because hearing those stories is harmful. How do we pick books that let people tell whole stories, that have kids as decision makers and problem solvers, that aren't based in whiteness? And that teachers can choose so they're not feeling forced to use one? What feels right to them. And that's really my goal. And it gives me room to say, you know, here's some books I like, what do you like? What are you going through and finding, and there's a powerful moment to me when people encounter books that match their identities in multiple ways. And I see people, people move to tears, because they want to know where these books were when they

were young, and why they weren't there. And we do children a disservice by keeping the stories away from them.

Tara: j wallace, thanks so much for joining us today. I loved hearing you speak about queer and trans space at OISE. And your plans for the coming year. Hope you have a terrific year. I'm sure you will.

j: I'm really excited about it and the energy that other folks are bringing to this as well.

Tara: Fantastic. j wallace, a PhD student at OISE is studying how schools can become safer, more accessible, and even celebratory for children and youth of all gender identities and gender expressions. j offers trainings on sexual orientation and gender identity through juxtapose consulting, [www.juxtaposeconsulting.com](http://www.juxtaposeconsulting.com). Alright, that's our podcast for today. 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 Doug Friesen who is a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Thanks to the LGBTQ Families Speak out team member Kate Reid, and engineer Lisa Patterson, and musician Doug Freisen for creating the music that opens and closes the show. I'm Tara Goldstein, all the best.