

S2 — Episode 6 — Supporting Trans and Gender Creative Students at School

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Tara talks to Master of Teaching students Bree McKenney and Emma Smith from the Ontario Institute for Studies who have completed research projects on the topic of supporting trans and gender creative students at school.

Tara: Hello, and welcome to Gender Sexuality School. I'm Tara Goldstein, and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Today, we have two Master of Teaching students, Bree McKenney, and Emma Smith from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. They're here to talk about their Master of Teaching Research projects. Both Bree and Emma are interested in supporting trans and gender creative students at school. Bree and Emma, welcome to Gender Sexuality Schooling. We're so happy to have you here. So, to begin our podcast, could each of you tell us the title of your project, what it's about, and why you wanted to study your topic?

Bree: Yeah, sure. So, I'm Bree. And my project is supporting transgender and gender creative students, and it's a policy analysis of educational policies.

Tara: Great, and these are school board policies?

Bree: Yes.

Tara: And why were you drawn to the analysis of school board policies for trans and gender creative students?

Bree: I think it really started with looking through some of the literature, I felt that supporting transgender and gender creative students was very important, just because they're not always visible in schools. So, there's not always that push to support these students until somebody becomes visible. And so, looking through a lot of the literature, what I found was that a lot of teachers and administrators aren't fluent in the policies that are created to support these students. And so, I guess I really wanted to delve into those policies and see, why is that the case? Why do teachers and administrators not know about them? Is there something about them that's confusing? Are they fragmented? Where are they? So that was sort of what led my analysis.

Tara: Excellent. And we'll go to you, Emma, what's your project about?

Emma: Yeah, so my project is called The Princess Problem, analysing representations of gender and ETFO's gender Booklist. And it's a document analysis, I'm taking a look at a few of the books, as previously mentioned, from ETFO's booklist on gender, it's part of a series of social justice booklets that they have created which are accessible by any elementary school teacher in Ontario. And so, I wanted to take a look at what they were recommending and see how these books are perhaps dismantling gender archetypes and stereotypes, or how they might unwittingly be, you know, upholding them. And the reason that I was drawn to this question is because I've had a lot of experience working with kids. And

one of my jobs that I do on the side, during my program, is that I'm a Party Princess. So that means that I dress up on the weekends as a Disney princess, and I go to these parties, and a lot of the times, I noticed when I'm there that the kids have certain ideas about what it means to be a princess, or what they can and cannot do based on the gender that they identify with. And so, these kids are really, really young. And I think one of the primary ways that they're getting all of these messages are through stories, such as the Princess stories that I'm basing my livelihood around, I guess, and also based on children's books that they might encounter at school. So that's why I was interested in the topic.

Tara: Great. So back to you, Bree. How many policy documents were you able to research for this particular project, which we know is a small project.

Bree: So, I started with 13 policies. And they really varied in topics. So, some of them were more things like, things like dress codes, and some of them are things like bullying and harassment policies, prevention policies. And, you know, when I had looked at the literature before, what I had found was that a lot of the policies are really focused on things like bullying and harassment prevention, which I would categorize as more reactive to the fact that there is bullying that these are issues that transgender and gender creative students are experiencing. So, looking at the proactive side of things, that's more like creating these inclusive and expectant communities. How do we, how do we do that? As teachers? What do the policies say about how we build our communities and how we support these students that would make it you know, a better place for them. So, you know, when I looked at all of these policies, it definitely was interesting because I found kind of a mix. So, there were certainly things about bullying and harassment, that I would categorize as reactive. But there are also a lot of really great proactive things as well, that kind of surfaced as I was looking at some things that kind of were in between. So that was really neat. That was something I didn't quite expect from the literature. It seemed very like one or the other. But as I really got into these policies, I was finding there's a great mix here.

Tara: So that seems like a very interesting frame, those that are reactive, those policies that are proactive, and then some that are a mix. Did you find that there were any surprises in any of the documents, things that you weren't expecting?

Bree: I think I was— I was pleasantly surprised looking through some of the information about dress codes, just with a lot of really comprehensive definitions that talked about gender identity and expression and explained the idea of cisnormativity. And I thought that was something that as a teacher could be very helpful as a tool, just kind of, you know, understanding not just the dress code policy, but why cis— cisnormativity is problematic in schools. So that was one thing that really stood out to me. Yeah.

Tara: And going back to something you said earlier, you were wondering if the policies were confusing, or perhaps didn't have enough information. And if that was why teachers didn't seem to, to really take them up in their classrooms. But from what you just said, the dress code policy actually gives quite a lot

of information. Right. So, in answer to your own question, do you have any sense of why these policies aren't being taken up in, in the way that you would imagine would be helpful?

Bree: Yeah, I think there was something to the idea of them being fragmented. I, you know, there in the policies that I looked at, there was one guideline that was fairly comprehensive, that was focused on supporting transgender and gender creative students, and it was quite comprehensive. But when you were looking at the other policies, particularly things that had to do with bullying and harassment, things that had to do with just, you know, regular operations of the school in this, how the school day works, things like how certain curriculum content might be chosen, or things like that. It was very kind of, you had to read through each policy, and you'd find snippets here and there that would reference, maybe gender identity, gender expression, you know, but it was not, there weren't a lot of policies that really drove that point home. So, I think as a teacher, if you were trying to find, you know, these— these policies and these things that support you, because one of the things that the literature said was that often teachers are afraid to comment, you know, have these conversations and to approach topics of gender identity, because they're afraid of backlash, and things like that from the community. So, if you're a teacher, and you're looking for this kind of support, and the documents, it can be kind of difficult to find those— those pieces and those snippets.

Tara: So, what's probably needed is an overall document that focuses on gender identity and gender expression, maybe pulling together all the different documents and using that for maybe teacher development.

Bree: Right. And I think that was, you know, that was apparent was, that there was that document, it does exist, you know, there are things that have very specific information about gender identity. But when you're looking at the wider tapestry of policies, it is fairly fragmented. And I think that that professional development piece is really key. So, a lot of these different documents stipulated, oh, we need professional development, in you know, this area, in this area. But what I would be curious to see is, what does that professional development look like? What materials are they using? Is it really critical reflection on some of the institutional and systemic issues that transgender students and gender creative students are facing? Or is it more surface level? Are teachers receiving information about like gender identity literacy? So, do they understand the terms? Do they understand like what it means? And then are they taking it to that next critical level, which is kind of an anti-oppressive level?

Tara: Excellent. So, on that idea of literacy, we'll go back to the books that Emma is studying. So, Emma, how many books on the list did you take a look at?

Emma: Well, I started out, I wanted to just take the five most recently written, because I think that a lot of strides and changes have been taking place in terms of the narrative surrounding the gender binary. And you know, within the last 10 years, there have been a lot of efforts to dismantle and broaden kind of our ideas about gender. But when I went to the book list, the most recent book that they had was published in 2010. And so, you can imagine I was very surprised by this. And so, I had to kind of re-evaluate how I was going to find which books to study. And that's when I started coding around words

because last year, my lit review was all about language and the messaging, the unconscious messaging that teachers can perpetuate by using certain language in the classroom. And so based on that, I started looking for words and just seeing where that took me. And so, as I was looking through trying to find patterns, I noticed that there was one word that was being used more than any other in the book list, and it wasn't boy or girl, or male or female. It was the word princess. Yeah. So that, you know, with my positionality and the whole reason I came to this in the first place, I thought it was sort of a sign. And so, I took all of the books that had the word princess in them. There are four of them.

Tara: What are they called? Do you remember them?

Emma: One is called My Princess Boy. I'm sure I have a list somewhere. Like Princess Boy, Not All Princesses Wear Pink, Princess Grace. And the last one is, ah yes, The Paperbag Princess, which was a favorite of mine when I was little. Um, yeah. So, I started coding them for the language that they used. And that's where I kind of came up with the patterns that ended up in my findings.

Tara: Fantastic. So, what were some of your findings? What did you see as a pattern in these Princess books?

Emma: So, one thing that I really noticed is that as much as the word princess was being associated with non-stereotypical female associations, more so those associations of stereotypical associations were being made first, sorry if that was a little convoluted. So, it seemed like the authors had to first establish the traditional stereotypes about females before trying to challenge them, right. And I found that really interesting. But also troubling, because as I've been looking into the perpetuation of stereotypes and how they develop, and you know, keep going in a society, it's because we keep on repeating them. And people seem to even have a tendency when they see counter evidence against a stereotype to still hold on to that stereotype. It's like not even a logical thing. Sometimes it like transcends logic, the stereotypes. And so, when we're pushing these stereotypes at a child, and then trying to subvert them, right, the child might not get that messaging, so.

Tara: Were there any Princess boys in any of the books; from what you've said it was about, it was still a binary kind of dealing with gender. And there were different kinds of girl Princess, princesses. But were there any boy princesses?

Emma: Yeah, so one of the books is called My Princess Boy. And so that's a book all about a character who loves pink and loves pretty things and sparkly things and loves to dance. And it's a really, really lovely book, right? And it's all about how the people around him have the choice to either accept that he is a princess or not, right?

Tara: Does he himself call himself a princess?

Emma: He does. Yes, that's a label that he takes for himself. But again, it's very much like, this boy is different. He's othered, because of the fact that he's taking on this role as a princess, even though that's

a girl thing. Air quotes, right? So even though the book is really trying to normalize, first it has to other him. And I found that really interesting.

Tara: Totally interesting. So, was there any non-binary gendered character in any of these books about princesses?

Emma: No, there wasn't. And so, what I've been working on is kind of a second half of my research paper is sourcing my own books. And comparing them and contrasting them with these Princess books, to see if there's some other approaches that authors are taking more recently. So now I'm looking at books that were published within the last few years, right. And I'm finding a lot more just laying out identity first, rather than laying out the stereotype first and subverting it.

Tara: Excellent. Excellent. So, continuing on, Emma, thinking about what brought you to the whole project, your own work as a princess, and the things that you saw that were happening and the role you were playing in perpetuating particular ideas about princesses. Now that you've done all of this analysis: Do you think that there's any space in your own work as a princess, to subvert some of the stereotypes or does something completely different have to happen at children's birthday parties?

Emma: Totally. I mean, that's something I struggle I've struggled with the whole time I've had this job, right? Because you go into this room, and the kids tell you like, oh, I wish that I were you, Elsa, I wish I were a princess too. And then they have all these ideas about what that means. And the thing is, when I'm dressed up, I have the authority to tell them. No, none of this is what means being a princess. I can go ahead and redefine for them. And like I've had a lot of success with that. Like there's a part of the party where we put magic dust on all the kids and I often get a little boy saying like, oh, I can't have that, can I? And I say of course you can! Why can't you? You know? And so you kind of do have that power, whether you're acting as a princess or not, and teachers have this too, they have the power to be role models and to redefine, and to not even introduce stereotypes in the first place.

Bree: I'd love to jump in if that's okay.

Tara: Go ahead, Bree!

Bree: What you're saying about this, like the authority and this— this platform really that you have. And I think I was saying to you earlier, but I'll say it again, you know, with this project, I've really grappled quite a bit with my own positionality, being a cisgender person working with some very complex issues regarding gender and gender identity. And one of the things that I've really thought quite deeply about is my role as a teacher. And, you know, as teachers, we work with students who come from so many different complex intersectional backgrounds. And I think we often have a tendency to sort of use our own positionality as a bit of a scapegoat sometimes to not engage with issues because we might say, well, I don't have that lived experience. So, I'm maybe not most competent, or I'm not really, I don't have the authority here to talk about this or to comment on this. And I think that that's, you know, I think it's a really, it's an important part of allyship is to be able to recognize your own positionality. And

to listen and to be amplifying the voices. So, in my case, I spent a lot of time thinking about how can I amplify the voices of transgender and gender creative scholars with my work with my literature review? And I really did my best to do that in this case. So I think that yeah, so I think that kind of having that platform as a teacher and using that platform, for some of these, these equity issues and these, you know, these things that maybe a lot of people wouldn't want to engage with, because they're a little bit afraid to, I think that we can't be expecting, in the case of my project, I can't be expecting transgender and gender creative people to be shouldering that burden forever, I think it's an important thing that allies kind of take up that, that cause and work alongside and amplify those voices, as long as you choose, you know, picture yourself, pose yourself as the learner, right? So, I'll never be really the expert on this, this subject matter. That's not necessarily my place, but I can still use my platform as a teacher to be, you know, teaching these things and amplifying those voices.

Tara: Excellent. So let's continue on that, on that idea. What are the implications of your research for other educators knowing what you know now, how might you work with what you found out?

Bree: What I found out, there is no, certainly a lot of content in these policies that protects your right to address these, these topics. And I know that some people are concerned about backlash, or you know, not having administrator support. But there are things in the policies that you can point out to say like this is part of our curriculum, it's a human rights concern, these things need to be addressed, they need to be as, like you were talking about with literacy, in the literature, the books, they should be infused across the curriculum, this isn't something that we talk about once, it's something that we, you know, we try to integrate with all of our teaching with, you know, diverse gender identities, breaking down those gender roles and those gender norms. So, I think that's a really important thing for teachers to remember that these supports are there for you. And you may have to go looking, but it's becoming I think, more widespread for there to be more comprehensive policies, as in the case of those— the ones that I was telling you about earlier. And then I guess, also just, you know, it is a human rights concern. I think these are really important topics that we need to be talking about, that students need to be hearing about, not just for the affirmation of individual students, but for our communities to be affirmative and expectant, and, you know, just good for everybody, so.

Tara: Thank you so much. Back to you Emma, what would you like to tell the folks who created that gender book list, having done this project? What would you like to say to them if you were given the opportunity?

Emma: I know they're very busy right now. Update your agenda, book lists and your other social justice book lists, there are many posted there. And I noticed across the board that I don't know when exactly they were posted, but a lot more progress has been made. And so, at the end of my paper, I recommend a few books that could be added. I think there's definitely an opportunity for more diverse voices in terms of authors, as well. And I think, it's really, really important with something like ETFO's book list, it does have power, right? A teacher can go and look at that and might find all of the books that they need based on that book list. And if that book list isn't fully encapsulating what is available out in the world, and that's going to make all kids feel represented in the literature, which we know is such a powerful

and important thing for every student to feel represented in what they read and what's available in the classroom. Then it's just not good enough, right? We need to make those things accessible to them.

Tara: Right. So, when it's all said and done, and when our strike actions are completed, do you imagine sending your paper to ETFO?

Emma: I was thinking about maybe turning it into an open letter, or maybe even turning it into a children's book.

Tara: Interesting. Interesting. That sounds, sounds great. And Bree, do you have any plans on sharing your, your policy analysis or any plans for the future? How might you expand your— your research?

Bree: Yeah, I don't know right now if it's in a place where I would be sharing it widely. But I do think that there are some implications for further research, I think that the model that I've used looking at these different policies, and kind of putting them together as a tapestry that kind of tells me I treated them as one document, really, when I was, when I was working from them. And I think if I were to do this across multiple school boards, or across just a wider, you know, a wider scale, really, I may be able to get a better sampling of just what types of policies are out there. I'd love to look at rural settings as well, and see what the, you know, if there's any difference between more urban and rural settings, as far as how gender is, you know, protected in school, how gender identities are addressed in schools. So, I think there's definitely a lot that could be done there as far as research goes, but we'll see.

Tara: Fantastic. Any last words from either of you, we'll start with Emma: last words about what it was like to do the research project and, and your topic?

Emma: It was really nice to be able to dip my toes into the world of research. And as a teacher, you know, we talk a lot at OISE, about always being a teacher-researcher, right. And I think that is something really important that we'll be taking with me into my career in the classroom. Hopefully, I'll get hired at some point. But yeah, just always knowing that you're learning, like you were saying, you're always a learner. And you can really only talk, speak from your own experiences, but you can also provide opportunities to make other people feel heard and to give voice. So, I think that's a really important thing to remember as a teacher.

Tara: Thank you, Emma. And how about you Bree?

Bree: I think the biggest thing that I took away from this project, it was quite humbling. I came into it thinking I knew a fair bit, right. And as I got more and more into the research project, project, I realized I was, I was like, wow, there's so much that I don't know about this topic. And there's so, so much to learn. And it's very much evolving as we speak. And so, I think it was humbling for me, it was an amazing learning experience. And I think it just was a really great reminder that this whole idea of allyship is a journey. It's not something that you arrive at. It's something that you're continually building, you're working at, you're listening. And so, I think that was a really important takeaway for me.

Tara: Wonderful. Bree and Emma, thanks so much for joining us today. I really loved hearing you talk about your master teaching research projects. Bree McKenney and Emma Smith are Master of Teaching students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Bree is studying to become a teacher in the primary/junior panel, and Emma is studying to become a teacher in the junior/intermediate panel. Alright, that's our podcast for today. You can find this podcast at www.LGBTQfamiliespeakout.ca This episode was produced with 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, sound engineer Lisa Patterson, and musician Doug Freisen for creating the music that opens and closes the show. I'm Tara Goldstein. All the best.