

S2 — Episode 7 — Navigating Sexuality and Gender Identities as a Student Teacher

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Tara talks to Master of Teaching students Kris Orr and Braden Kenny, who is also a member of the LGBTQ Families research team, who have completed research projects on the topic of navigating sexuality and gender identities as a student teacher.

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, Kris Orr and Braden Kenny, from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. They're here to join us to talk about their Master of Teaching Research projects. Both Chris and Braden are interested in the experiences of LGBTQ student teachers at school. Chris, and Braden, welcome to Gender Sexuality Schooling. We're really happy to have you here.

Braden: Hey, thanks for inviting me. Yeah.

Kris: Thanks for having us, Tara.

Tara: Such a pleasure. 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?

Kris: Sure. So, my research project is LGBTQ+ self-identified pre-service teacher candidates who are streamed in the Catholic School Board. And I became interested in this because I self-identify as queer. And I was brought up Catholic, I'm not practicing now. But I figured coming into the program, because I went through catechism, I was like, hey, why don't I consider working in the Catholic School Board. And I was actually connected with a few other teacher candidates who are in like a similar position to me and considering working in the Catholic School Board. And I realized we all had pretty similar questions and fears around being our authentic selves in the classroom. And so, I started looking into research and realizing, through reading, especially Tonya Callaghan's *Homophobia in the Hallways*, that there were other folks who were working through these struggles and like work to be done there.

Tara: Excellent. Excellent. Braden, what about your project?

Braden: So actually, similar to Kris, I'm looking at the experiences of queer teacher candidates, and the K to 12 education system. And so, I got interested in this topic due to just my own research of what was out there. And it looked like there was a lot more research on the experiences of queer teachers that are often like unionized, or have contract positions, have like union representation. But there was little research on actually what are the experiences of queer teacher candidates, and kind of already teacher candidates, when you're going into placement, you can kind of be in a vulnerable situation. And then on top of that, when you add queer identities, and other form of identities on top of that, that can also cause for people to feel that they either have to conceal or hinder from having to disclose their identity. And so, I think just from my own experience, navigating the education system as a teacher candidate, who identifies as queer, I thought that this would be an interesting research project to endeavour.

Tara: Wait, so both of you interviewed other teachers. And you asked them about their experiences. What did they tell you? What kind of things did they share with you? And did anything surprise you? We'll go to Kris first.

Kris: I spoke with two teacher candidates. And both had very different experiences, with grappling with whether they wanted to be out in their Catholic classrooms or not. But both having sort of similar experiences in their Catholic education classes at OISE. And I think something that surprised me about the interviews was that I think I naively anticipated since, you know, OISE seems to be such like an open minded, inclusive environment, I just thought that topics of identity would be present within the Catholic education course, and multiple ways of integrating your faith. And I found that those were the major concerns of both of the teacher candidates and that they both really wanted more connection and community around those topics that wasn't really present for them, or that didn't particularly have the space for them here. So yeah, so that was— I found pretty surprising for me.

Tara: Did they ask their Catholic option teacher educator, if they could have that kind of discussion where they— did they feel that they could at least ask, and what was the response that they got?

Kris: So, the topic of, I think it was specifically, how do you respond to if a student in your class asks about gay marriage? Right? I know that that topic came up in the classroom and that the instructor sort of had a pre-made response that was like, well, you, kind of just have to hold up Catholic doctrine and sort of like end the conversation there. And I know that some of the students on their own time kind of talked about, brought up those topics in small groups, because they wanted to, like address it more in a way that they felt was shut down in class.

Tara: It's very interesting, because OISE doesn't actually hire the Catholic teacher educators who teach in the Catholic course, it's kind of given over to the religious institutions that are in charge of additional qualifications, right. And so that when you talk about how our social justice culture hasn't kind of made its way to Catholic education, and doctrine playing a big part of the responses to questions around sexuality, and gender for that matter, too. I think it's partly because we have that part of the program being run by a separate institution. Is that something that you have talked about with other Catholic teacher candidates as well?

Kris: Um, I felt like, I, well, I think at least one of the teacher candidates, like wasn't aware that it was sourced outside the system. So, I think like, because there isn't that sort of transparency. It might be a bit confusing to TCs in the class. But although I think they both definitely noted that there were some misalignments with that course and the rest of the program.

Tara: Right. So interesting. Back to you, Braden, tell us who you talk to, and the kinds of things that they shared with you.

Braden: Great. So yeah, I had the opportunity to interview two teacher candidates from OISE and I had the chance to kind of get to hear about their experiences. And I kind of left it broad enough so that they could describe what experiences that they had in their practicum schools. So what I found interesting was that, in fact, there are a lot of experiences that are unique to teacher candidates that identify as queer and just teacher candidates in general than teachers that had been previously interviewed that focused more on like job security, and kind of their peer relationships, while teacher candidates were more focused on kind of how they would fit in at the school in their community during their time there. So, one of the most interesting findings I found was the most positive spaces that teacher candidates felt included in were those actually created by students. So, although the teachers, some teacher candidates had support by their associated teachers, a lot of times they didn't feel like they would be open enough to discuss their gender identity or sexuality with their teachers, but rather more with students, which was really interesting. And so, I found that this manifested in different ways. Sometimes it was as simple as seeing what kind of things students were reading, so add queer related content, or the presentations that they decided to do just because they were interested in it, as well as GSAs and the organizations that students led created the most positive spaces for teacher candidates to be more of themselves, rather than in the classroom, which I found interesting.

Tara: Very interesting. Very interesting. So, let's go to the implications part of our talk today. Braden, we'll start with you, given what you found out, what implications does your study have for yourself or for other teachers?

Braden: Yeah, so I think that the implications for this research really speak to teacher preparation programs like OISE and other faculties of education. I think that they're just by the participants response, there's more of a need for teacher preparation programs to support queer identifying teacher candidates, and even the participants themselves expressed a need for support, whether it be having more communication with their associate teacher by including their preferred pronoun or desired name, to be included in their practicum record, as well as just ensuring that teacher candidates know there are rights going in as both a teacher candidate and as a queer person working in the Ontario context. And so, I think that there's need more from the support of the teacher preparation program to ensure that their experience and identities are validated in their courses. And so, then this can be translated in the classroom.

Tara: Given that you're just about ready to finish your two-year program, where in the program do you think that that support needs to be located?

Braden: Right. I think that it needs to be a conversation, I know that going into your first practicum, at least at this institution is within like a month and a bit. And I know that Kris, you probably feel similar that there's a lot to take in even just as a teacher candidate, preparing yourself. But I think that that needs to be an initial discussion that needs to happen before teacher candidates go into their practicums. And just something that even, it's just in place. So, teacher candidates don't feel the need to have to explain or disclose their identity with an associate teacher that often is more professional setting, and they just feel uncomfortable when it's not someone close to them. So, I think just having

those systems already in place. And having that mandate would just allow for teacher candidates to feel comfortable going into their, even their first practicum.

Tara: And who is it? Or in which course do you get that little bit of practicum preparation? Is it in a course that's part of what you study as a cohort? In a co-curricular workshop? How does getting ready for practicum happen in the MT program?

Braden: Yeah, it almost feels like a lot of it is just kind of like talking within your courses about it. But there's no kind of like explicit, I think, instruction on what your practicum is going to look like, what to expect. I think that's more kind of like either through emails, or more administrative notes that they send, but nothing really explicitly taught in courses. I think the closest thing that I got to preparing myself was I had a law course. But even then, we only had a month, work with it. And I think that the, the, the lecture for that course did a really good job in just, for us understanding our own rights. So that I think that that helped me in that sense. But that was the only really extent to which we discuss kind of practicum.

Tara: Excellent. Before we go back to your study, Kris, I know that you're in a different panel than Braden, did practicum get discussed in any particular way? Or was your experience similar?

Kris: My experience was fairly similar to Braden's. I did, however, have my, my law course and also my fundamentals of teaching course, kind of fused together, we had the same instructor, and so she was able to really spend a lot more time with our cohort. So, I felt like in that course, I was somewhat prepared for practicum. And that our instructor had us like preparing business cards and giving us some more like emotional support on what to anticipate and feeling like we could really go to her as well as our practicum advisor if we did need support on the day of, but I do also feel like there was a lot more space to get a more concrete idea of what exactly to expect. Yeah, we never really had the walkthrough of even things like, like when, when you should reach out about, say, if not everybody has the best experience with their ATs. And I know that some of my— some folks in my cohorts like weren't really certain when it was appropriate or inappropriate to reach out to their cohort advisor right about that. Yeah.

Tara: Excellent. So back to your study, Kris. Implications of your interviews, what kinds of things are important for your own practice? What kinds of things are important for other people? Yeah.

Kris: So, I would say my implications are somewhat similar to Braden's where the teacher candidates expressed wanting to have more of a space for an open community where they can like really express whatever fears or challenges or desires, they have going forward in the classroom and how to address topics such as disclosing gender identity and sexuality to your ATs. I also found that it's interesting what— something that, that Braden mentioned, sparked something in my head that, where I've seen the topics of religion and sexuality really like supported best on campus has typically been in actual student groups. I know that there was like a queering religion group that I went to a few times, which was by far like the most open space I've been in. Where, yeah, it was, it was very open where folks from different

religions would come together and sort of talk about their experiences of being at intersections. And I don't know if we need, maybe we need a space like that at OISE.

Tara: We do have a GSA, right. It's called Queer and Trans Space Chat. Did either of you have a chance to spend any time in that group? And is that a topic that could be taken up with that group? Or does it need to be a group on its own, do you think?

Kris: Yeah, so I think we were both involved in it.

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