

S3 — Episode 1 — Race, Gender, and Early Education

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Tara talks to Professor Harper Keenan from the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia about two recent research projects: Building Blocks: Race, Gender and Early Education project and Drag Pedagogy.

Tara: Hello, and welcome to Gender Sexuality School. I'm Tara Goldstein and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Today, Professor Harper Keenan, from the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, joins us to talk about two very exciting research projects he has begun. The first is called Building Blocks: Race, Gender, and Early Education. And the second: Drag Pedagogy. Harper, welcome to Gender Sexuality Schooling, we are so happy to have you here.

Harper: Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

Tara: So, we're going to begin and the way we always like to begin is, can you tell us a little bit about the history of the project, how it got started, and what its goals are, maybe we'll start with the Building Blocks project, and then you can move on to Drag Pedagogy.

Harper: Sure, thanks so much. Well, I would say that both projects, but perhaps in particular Building Blocks emerge out of my first job as a kindergarten teacher in New York City. And I loved that work a great deal. And the adults that I worked with were very commonly imposing gendered expectations on the kids that we worked with, all the time. And those expectations were usually based in assumptions that were really framed heavily by whiteness. So, the idea of what a boy should be or girl should be, was very much through the prism of whiteness. And then when I started working in teacher education, a few years later, I learned that many, many educators in elementary education, but maybe in particular, K to 2, were very deeply concerned by the kind of gendering practices that take place, in particular in early education. But they didn't know how to do things differently. And in particular, they didn't understand how their students made sense of gender. So, in order to develop kind of a responsive curriculum for them, they needed more information about how their students made sense of gender. So, that's really what the project is aiming to do is to learn more about how young children make sense of gender, how that intersects with race, and what teachers can do differently in order to effectively support them. So, that's the Building Blocks project, and then Drag Pedagogy; really, I guess that emerges from a lot of beautiful elements of my community. I have always been a great admirer of drag artists, I am not one myself, I could not even try if I wanted to. I don't have it in me, I'm afraid. But I have always appreciated drag as an art form. And a few years ago, several people in my community who I had long standing social relationships with started this program called Drag Queen Story Hour that really took off around the world, it's happened on almost every major continent at this point, some variation of Drag Queen Story Hour has taken place. And it's a really different approach to teaching young children about queer, trans, LGBTQ life than many others. This is really bringing kind of drag as a queer art form to spaces with young children, in particular public libraries. And so, I really wanted to think about what teachers might learn

from that kind of approach, and how schools and drag queens can work together to make queer culture more present in schools.

Tara: So exciting. Tell us a little bit about why you think it's so important to do research on gender in elementary schools in particular, whether it's the community working with teachers, as in the Drag Pedagogy project, or whether it's you interviewing teachers about gender, why elementary school? Why is research in that context so important?

Harper: Yeah, I could say a lot on this question. But what I always like to start with is that children live in a world that is heavily structured by gender, and so we need to talk with them about that. Often, we just assume that children can't understand gender in complex ways, but my research preliminarily demonstrates quite to the contrary. And so, I think that talking about gender with young children is just one of the ways that we can move toward a more complex and rigorous way of educating young— young children from their first experiences in school. So, I think there's a lot we can learn about the way we talk about gender with kids, that has strong implications for the ways that we talk about other kinds of complex but sometimes taken for granted social categories, things like racialization, Indigeneity, things— even things like government, etc. These are things that we often explain, or by we, I mean adults, explain to children in very simple ways, but I think it really does them a disservice by not meeting with them with the level of rigor that really, they're quite ready for.

Tara: Excellent. What are your hopes for both of these projects? When they're done, how would you like to see the findings used? Who do you want to engage with what it is that you found out?

Harper: Yeah, thanks for that question. I think first and foremost, I want schools to be better places for kids. That is my utmost goal, is that we think with greater complexity about what it means to educate young children. And so, I would like to see teachers think with greater complexity about the role of gender in the lives of their young students, because I think it plays quite a central role. We have evidence that gender plays, you know, a key role in shaping academic outcomes and disparities, as well as social relationships and children's sense of self. But we really don't know much about how they understand gender as a construct. And so, I hope that this research will deepen what adults know about kids and improve how we think about the practice of education. So primarily, I hope to impact pedagogical practice, but I could see it also, you know, impacting policy, and curriculum as well.

Tara: So exciting. Harper, before we go, can you tell us a little bit about your work at UBC? We understand that the faculty of Ed at UBC is doing a lot of exciting things around gender and sexuality and schooling. Maybe give us a little bit about the community that you're part of there, and what kinds of things are going on?

Harper: For sure, thanks. Yeah, so I am currently the director of a program at UBC called SOGI UBC, which stands for sexual orientation and gender identity. And it's aimed really at thinking about how K to 12 teachers can be better prepared to support young people of all genders and sexualities. And so, we have a variety of programs that we offer to teacher candidates, primarily, including a speaker series on

anti-racist SOGI education, a mentorship program that we're offering to our LGBTQ2S teacher candidates, pairing them with mentors who are LGBTQ2S themselves and are practicing teachers. And we have a professional development series for both our faculty advisors and our teacher candidates on thinking about anti-racist approaches to SOGI education. So those are a few of the things we're doing. We do some other things too. But it's a great honour to hold this position.

Tara: I'm sure your leadership is taking all of those projects in exciting new directions. Tell us a little more about the mentoring because that really seems innovative. To me, it's the first time I've heard of programming like that. What's, what kinds of things are folks beginning to engage with?

Harper: Yeah, well, this is a new program that we haven't yet totally launched. It's in process. It's just getting started. So, I'll have more to say, in about six months. But the kind of goal of this program is to provide additional supports to 2SLGBTQ educators who often experience particularly difficult challenges in their practicum. So, this mentorship program is aimed at really trying to pair 2SLGBTQ educators, preservice educators, with folks who know a little bit about what their experience might be like and can offer them more kind of tailored support from their lived experience. And this is really also meant to be a draw to our program for 2SLGBTQ teacher candidates because, you know, anecdotally, we know that 2SLGBTQ folks to often don't see themselves fitting into K to 12 schools or becoming teachers, often because they had difficult experiences in school in K to 12 education themselves. And so, it's important that we make sure that in order to truly diversify our teaching force that we are providing real explicit supports to our queer and trans and Two-Spirit students.

Tara: Wonderful. I think it would be great to have you come back in a few months and— and tell us all about how that's going on.

Harper: Absolutely. Thank you so much.

Tara: Harper Keenan, thank you so much for joining us today. I loved hearing about both the building blocks project and the drag pedagogy project. We think your research on gender in elementary schools is cutting edge and important to Ed. It's just so great for us to be able to hear how it's playing out at this moment. Harper Keenan is an assistant professor and professor of gender and sexuality research and education in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Harper's teaching, research and advocacy work focuses on two themes. The first is the interaction of colonialism, race, and gender in schools. We've heard a lot about that today, particularly in early childhood and elementary education. And the second is the development of anti-racist queer and trans pedagogies, which we also heard today. All right, that's our podcast for today. 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 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.