

### **S3 — Episode 2 — Educational Trajectories of Black Queer Youth**

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Tara talks to Professor Lance McCready from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education about his ongoing research on the educational trajectories of Black Queer Youth.

Tara: Hello, and welcome to season three of Gender Sexuality School. I'm Tara Goldstein and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Today, Professor Lance McCready, a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and the director of the transitional year program at the University of Toronto, joins us to talk about an exciting new research project on the educational trajectories of Black queer youth. Lance! Welcome to Gender Sexuality School. We're so happy to have you here.

Lance: Thank you very much. I'm happy to be here. And it's really good to be speaking with you in a podcast.

Tara: Something new and different for us! We often talk about our work together, but it's nice to do it in this way. So, Lance, to begin our podcast about your new research, can you tell us a little bit about the history of the project, how it got started, and what its goals are?

Lance: Sure. So, I want to tell you about the educational trajectories of Black queer youth project. It's really one of my longest lines of inquiry that really began in the United States while I was in graduate school at University of California, Berkeley, and it's continued here in Canada. And it's actually, you know, funny that I'm saying that out loud, because I don't usually say it like that. I don't introduce it that way. But it really is one of my longest lines of inquiry. I guess it really began in the late 90s and early 2000s. And it's continued now that I have a huge corpus of work based on it. But basically, the project, I've been doing interviews and participant observation, with Black queer youth age 16, all the way up to 29 years old. And it's across a number of different education settings. Thinking about education and learning in schools and non-formal settings, like community-based organizations, as well as the informal, online, through social media and internet communication technologies. And the goals of the research are really to understand the pathways of education of Black queer youth, with a particular interest for me in how many young people start out in school. But for a variety of reasons related to coming out, transitioning, experiencing bullying, getting kicked out of their homes or experiencing precarious housing, they often leave formal education settings and continue their learning in these non-formal spaces, like HIV AIDS organizations, or most recently informally on the internet, through sort of various blogs or vlogs, social media, yeah, and so that's, that's really sort of the general sort of goals of this study. What I've always been interested in it goes back to one of my first experiences doing field work in the urban high school that I wrote my dissertation about was, one day, I was shadowing a student and there was a— what do you call it— the fire alarm went off, for a drill. And the young person basically left school with everybody else, and then took off and ran from school. And I was thinking, "Okay, I'm supposed to be shadowing him. Should I run after him or just stay here or..." I was a little stuck. What am I supposed to do? But I thought it made me look funny. I mean, I think him bolting from school was not necessarily that surprising. But it also became a metaphor for me of how so many young people and

Black queer youth in particular, sort of really feel the need to leave school in order to continue their sort of learning and social development.

Tara: Really powerful metaphor. Did you ever have a chance to ask the student why, you know, they bolted?

Lance: Yeah, I mean, it was— they didn't want to be in school anymore. It was a time like I was like, okay—

Tara: It was an opportunity.

Lance: Yes, there's an opportunity. And, you know, so and, you know, there was not going to be the same amount of surveillance, because it was the chaos of a— of a fire drill. Right. And, you know, he did, I think a lot of, another sort of key finding on that work is that a lot of Black youth did not find a home or a sense of belonging in their academic classes, but in their arts classes, of course, right. And in this case, at this school, there was this African dance program that was very popular. And I had started doing my fieldwork in this school. And one of the first phenomenon that I sort of reported on was that there weren't a lot of Black queer youth that were going to the schools Gay Straight Alliance. And why is that? And then, you know, through more fieldwork in the school, I learned that there was sort of this underground network of Black queer youth, and a lot of them were participating in the African dance program. And so that became, you know, and that was actually one of the chapters that I wrote in the book about it making space for diverse masculinities, but um, yeah, so you know, he didn't really find a space in the academic program was much more interested in extra and co-curricular sort of offerings of school. And so, you know, the fire drill gave an opportunity to sort of bolt from the academic classes and— yeah.

Tara: Yeah. And then as you said, you've been able to use that as a metaphor. Lance, you talked a little bit about informal learning on the internet. What kinds of things have the folks who you've been working with been interested in? Is there anything in particular— is it a wide variety of, of blogs and topics that they're interested in?

Lance: Yeah, so I'm— that sort of line of inquiry, that sort of a part of the main one of educational trajectories has really taken off in Canada. I, I'm for, I guess, a number of years now, been a co-investigator on projects that have been led by Dr. Shelley Craig, in social work—

Tara: At U of T?

Lance: Here at U of T. Yeah, I actually have a, I mean, that's a whole other thing we could talk about. But I think because a lot of my research is concerned holistically with the development and well-being of Black queer youth, it ends up being very adjacent to social work.

Tara: Understood.

Lance: So, you know, so I actually have a bunch of colleagues in the School of Social Work.

Tara: So interesting.

Lance: You know, more, more, and we're more aligned than really some of my education colleagues. Interestingly, it's taken me a long time to figure that out. Because I haven't like, I haven't understood always why. But anyway, so basically, that research looks at the ways that social media and internet communication technologies may foster resilience in queer youth. So, you know, so it's really responding to sort of a lot of the early research that was really focused on just how sort of online bullying and how the Internet was maybe bad for you. And there's still a lot of sort of research even now, I can't remember what this line of research— but it's basically talking about how even trans youth are sort of damaged by all the social media and content online and actually makes them want to be trans more than if they didn't watch it. So, there're a whole bunch of conservative researchers that want to, like, limit the amount of social media that trans and gender non-conforming youth are consuming because they think it'll push them to being trans and non-binary. But, so a lot of that work with, because they're sort of social work folks, they're not as focused on sort of learning and education, they're more focused on sort of resilience and support and mental health. And I'm interested in those things, too. But I'm also just interested in so what they're learning and where. So, for instance, you know, with transgender, youth that identify as transgender or gender nonbinary, one of the most popular platforms or applications, is YouTube.

Tara: Interesting. And are they looking at people's journeys, the transgender journeys of other people on YouTube, what are they—?

Lance: I think that's, that's one of the things like there's, like transition, transitioning journey blogs, about transitioning, and also like, information or content about sort of doctors and what to think about, sort of bottom surgery, or what to think about top surgery or, you know, journey and sort of adapting your voice or like, there's just tons of content. And one of the things that I always like to point out is that this is content, and sort of, quote, unquote, curriculum and learning materials that youth can get in schools.

Tara: No, no, I was thinking exactly the same thing. I'm thinking of the human sexuality curriculum in most schools, and I can't imagine that curriculum including some of the— some of the social media that you've been talking about, yeah.

Lance: I think that that's really that's been a key thing to me. So, for me, a lot of the educational trajectories start out in the formal and move to the non-formal and informal precisely because of the limited curriculum and content that sort of queer youth need to fully develop, actualize, you know, support their well-being, sort of resilience, like schools aren't very good about that with, with sexual and gender minority, sort of youth in particular. And I mean, as you know, also not great for teachers either. But I think that's a key thing. And I think the— with Black queer youth, another point is that they're experiencing lots of marginalization, harassment, bullying, you know, based on multiple sort of social

identities. And so, I think that's been, I think that's been an important finding. I mean, it sort of demonstrates intersectionality, of course, that like, one of the big points I like to make is that, you know, Black queer youth experience a particular form of marginalization, which is a result of being at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. Right? And discrimination, right? So, it's interesting, for instance, the youth I wrote about, well, the youth I started writing-- that were the focus of, of the study in the United States, as well as the interviews I've done with Black queer youth here in Canada-- oftentimes, their teachers don't take their academic aspirations very seriously. Right. And part of that sometimes linked to their being Black, linked to their being gender non-conforming, link to their not being sort of middle class. So, it's multiple, sort of, of their particular sort of social positions in their identities that sort of make them the targets of a kind of low expectations and forms of discrimination. And so, I think that makes for a very-- I think, for many teachers, it makes for a very complicated sort of landscape of student identity and also for them, what is effective practice and supporting them? I have a colleague at Ryerson, Joanne Jon-Pierre, and she's always telling me, oh my gosh, I'm sorry. I have a colleague at, at, yeah, at Ryerson University, Joanne Jon-Pierre. And she's always telling me that, she's like, "Lance, teachers and parents just don't know what to do." She keeps trying to emphasize that to me. And I think because I have been sort of doing sort of research and sort of youth work with LGBTQ youth of colour since I've been in college, so really, in 1988, I started out sort of as a youth counsellor and advocate at a community-based organization called Project Reach, which was on the Lower East Side in New York City. And it was this incredible space, led by an Asian gay man, Don Kao. And it became this space where young people had to learn how to interact across sort of race and ethnicity and sexual orientation and gender. And we used to do this summer sort of youth counselling camp when we do projects. And it was really interesting seeing, you know, gang members, and queer youth and recent immigrants. And that's the great thing about the Lower East Side at that time, like us trying to facilitate these dialogues and social justice work across, but-- so for me, part of it is, there's a norm to always be negotiating all of those differences all the time.

Tara: And you've been doing it for over three decades. Right?

Lance: Yeah. And I think that for, but for many teachers, and educators, it's new. So even the concept of really like, adapting your curriculum, of course, is not going to be in the formal curriculum, you'll have to do other research, like, you know, meeting students where they're at, engaging them, you know, even if that's a challenge, and you have a class of 30 or 40, understandably, right, but just the idea that, of course, you're going to have to adapt your curriculum. And of course, you're going to have to do that. I think we learned that very quickly doing that sort of, you know, workshops, and, you know, education work in that sort of non-formal space with such a diverse group of youth. Right? We're not, I mean, the advantages were not tied down to a formal curriculum, the way sort of teachers and, like, public schools are right or-- But it's, it sort of taught me a valuable lesson about that. But I think in general, it's, it's, it's very difficult for a lot of teachers, and for that matter, related to your work, sort of parents and families to sort of wrap their head around how to support sort of their, you know, students, sons, daughters, children, non-binary children. Um, yeah, who are facing multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization.

Tara: I just feel like, you know, your, your work and my work really do intersect. So, so much my team's work, really, because I don't do it alone. I mean, what we did with the testimonies from LGBTQ families, is write them up in forms of letters to teachers, exactly to your point, that, you know, parents and teachers need to work together to figure out how to support their, their, their students and their children. So, and sometimes it's the parents who have something more to offer, and teachers need to listen to parents. And sometimes when parents are just beginning the journey of helping their students transition, it's a teacher who's had a little bit more experience who can, can step in. So, we found that it's a dynamic situation, but much more often, it's the parents who know their kids the best to have travelled a little way along the journey that they need to travel around figuring out how to best support their kids who are there to support the teachers. So, given all of this, what are your hopes for this latest, I guess, this latest set of interviews and participant observations you're doing with Black queer youth? What— what would you like to come out of it? Who would you like to engage with what you're finding out right now? And what kind of changes would you like to see?

Lance: I mean, there are.... I always have big aspirations for these things. I never know if they can be actualized. I think one of the things that I'm sort of learning about and that I wanted to do was see if I could promote post-secondary access among Black queer youth more. And that's part of— and you know, another thing that I know from participating in access programs and from doing sort of the research with Black queer youth is that their aspirations, they often sort of feel like college or university is not going to be the place for them, is not going to support their identities. And sort of they've learned, that's why they leave school, they're like, because school doesn't have the answers and the content and the relationships and people that they need to sort of thrive. Right, so they leave. So, I, part of what I wanted to do is sort of create an access program or support an access program that really is more open to sort of queer youth, queer youth of colour, and like, and to sort of try to be in openly Black gay man right at the head of a program and to see what we're doing with our curriculum, see what we're doing with our admissions. And so, it's a very applied sort of way. And I think sometimes, one of the things that I'm learning about myself as a researcher, I think I have such deep roots in community-based organizations and as a youth worker. I sort of, I have, definitely have a researcher brain and I've sort of cultivated that for a number of years, but at the same time, I have this sort of action applied brain. So, I sometimes jump into doing things to sort of have an impact, but I don't always have sort of the research, sort of that I've done to back it up, and then almost the research comes on top of it. So that's what I feel is happening at the transitional year program. As you know, every year we have some transgender identified or gender non-conforming or non-binary students and, and, you know, they've often left school, they may not have graduated from high school, they're trying to re-engage, they've often been told that they're not sort of university material. So, I'm just sort of learning about what these programs need to do and how we need to promote them. There are also a number of, you know, queer youth of colour. And not just, you know, non-white queer youth, but who are experiencing housing precarity. That's another thing that— so education is often in the world of the health and human services, education is not the biggest priority. Always the priority is housing and work, you know, medical attention, and then comes education if it ever gets to that. So, I'm trying to foreground something that we give more attention to education, because it is a social determinant of health that can actually have a positive impact on these other aspects of their lives in terms of housing, right, in terms of health and

well-being. So that's one thing I'm doing in other words, really, using what I've learned to create more inclusive, effective post-secondary access programs for Black queer youth. Another thing that I eventually wanted to do, this is the— what intersects with your work, is have more interventions and curriculum content for Black families, right? Where Black families that have, you know, children or young people who are queer, identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non— gender non-conforming, Two-Spirit, you know, asexual, intersex, etc. Right. Because I think that a lot of the— I don't really think there's a lot out there, really. And I think that, so that's, and I think the educational trajectories, one of the things I know from my interviews and fieldwork is the educational trajectories of Black queer youth are deeply affected by their family relationships. Yeah, basically, if they get kicked out and experience housing precarity or go into foster care or are, you know couch surfing, this inevitably derails any formal education aspirations or work they're doing. And then it becomes the work, for instance of a transitional year program to try to sort of reengage, stabilize these help, you know, stabilize these other areas, so that they can actually sort of achieve the education as— the formal educational aspirations that they have. But so that's the other piece, is develop sort of interventions content for Black families. That's another.

Tara: I think that's something you and I will work on together. You know, Lance, as we're closing up, I'm thinking about the stunning way your— your long-term interest, three decades long, in Black queer youth, and your current work in particular, is connecting to your, your administrative leadership in the transitional year program at U of T to come together to create new structural opportunities for Black queer youth. And it's a long-term project, no doubt, but extraordinarily exciting to see you integrate your research and, and institutional social activism in a way that will make a difference for Black queer youth. I think it's extraordinarily exciting. And, and I'm so glad that you're doing this.

Lance: Thank you.

Tara: I think it's quite wonderful.

Lance: I'm, I, I'm, I'm sort of happy with the path that I've been on. And then I'm also so conscious of, there's so much work to do. You know, I know so many people working in community programs and services, working to improve the lives of Black queer young people who actually don't have formal education credentials.

Tara: —themselves. Yeah. And what would their lives be like, or what opportunities would be available for them, and the youth they serve, if they had that opportunity, as well?

Lance: I mean, they're, I don't know, they're doing incredible work. And it's not like they quote, unquote, need the credential to do the work. They're doing it anyway. But I also am really just, I'm also struck about some of the limitations that they experience as well. Even in terms of one day, running those organizations or one day, sort of, you know, being sort of the next generation to really make some of these structural and systemic changes. I think that this— formal education credentials would really help that goal. Um, but you know, a lot of them at the same time have a lot of stuff that they're working

through personally to reengage with formal education. And so that sort of, the challenge, to me, it's a combination, sort of the structural and systemic, like, linking structurally and systemic, linking and honouring that work that they're doing community, but also the very personal work of confronting a lot of the, you know, quote, unquote, trauma they've experienced in formal educational institutions. So, I'm really happy to be doing it. I appreciate you, sort of making those connections. And I'm also aware that, wow, there's so much more to do.

Tara: Well, I think the next few years, as you continue to develop the transitional year program, Lance, at U of T, is going to see a lot of movement. And I think it's going to be very satisfying to see all of these ideas that you've shared with us today begin to take root, and I'm looking forward to supporting you in that in the next few years. I think it's going to be great.

Lance: Thanks, Tara, you've always been a really strong supporter of my work. And as you know, I'm a strong supporter of your work too. And it's been really, it was good for me to land in CTL. I think it was a good place. I know I'm not in that department anymore, in the curriculum, teaching and learning at OISE, but it really— I had some very supportive colleagues that I, that I— really supported the work and didn't sort of make me feel like it was a sort of a niche thing that couldn't have a larger impact. And I've experienced that a lot.

Tara: I'm so happy. And you know, in all of our academic journeys, you know, we move to different communities to do different work at different times, you know, and now that I've heard you talk about your interest in Black queer youth, and how you needed to leave the school setting to really understand what their pathways are about and what you might do to change outcomes for Black queer youth, it makes total sense that you needed to first move to a different department that had a wider view of what education was, adult education. And it makes such good sense that you found a community of researchers in social work because you are working at the intersections of many things, formal schooling, non-formal schooling, mental health, community programming. And it also makes sense how your latest part of your journey has brought you to be the director of the transitional year program, which could be an institutional response to some of the things that you have found in your research and, and your practice. So, you know, in some ways, by doing a little bit of autobiographical work with us today, you've shared parts of your own trajectory as an academic that really shed a whole lot of light on— on your research and your practice. And it's exciting, I think, for the young academics who are listening to this podcast to realize there are many moves in an academic career, that layer what you're interested in, and where you're taking a long-standing interest in ways that are different. And I think you've given us an idea of a variety of pathways to follow as an academic, to follow your social justice research and practice. So that's something that we didn't anticipate coming out on today's interview, but I think it's a wonderful thing to, to have talked about. So, thank you for that.

Lance: Thank you so much for being such a sort of smart and caring interviewer.

Tara: Lance McCready, thank you! Thanks so much for joining us today. I truly, truly loved hearing you speak about your research on educational pathways of Black queer youth and your current work at the

transitional year program. Lance McCready is an associate professor in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. He is also the director of the transitional year program at the University of Toronto and the lead researcher at Making Spaces Lab. Lance is also the principal investigator of three current research projects, educational trajectories of queer black youth, which we heard about today, Black student University access network and African Caribbean Black family group conferencing project. 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 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.