

## **S4 — Episode 2 — Introducing Gegi.ca**

*Goldstein, Tara and Friesen, Doug (Producers). (2021, Sept 1). [Audio podcast].*

Tara talks to Lee Airton, the Lead Researcher behind an exciting new advocacy website on gender expression and gender identity: [www.gegi.ca](http://www.gegi.ca)

Tara: Hello, and welcome to season four of Gender Sexuality School. I'm Tara Goldstein, and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Toronto is covered by Treaty 13, signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties, signed with multiple Mississauga and Chippewa bands. In Toronto, Ontario, and Canada, we are all Treaty people who need to work towards responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action. Today, Professor Lee Airton is back, this time to talk about their new website, [gegi.ca](http://gegi.ca), which features a unicorn named Gegi who helps visitors advocate for their gender expression and gender identity rights at school. Lee, welcome back to Gender Sexuality School! It is always such a pleasure to have you here to talk about your writing, your research, and your work.

Lee: Tara, I am always happy to talk to you. It's great to see you. And thank you so much for having me.

Tara: Such a pleasure. So Lee, to begin our interview, can you tell us a little bit about the reasons you and your research team at Queen's created Gegi and the Gegi website?

You got it. So, the [gegi.ca](http://gegi.ca) resource is a knowledge mobilization output of a research project. So, we didn't, we didn't just say "Ooh, we're going to make a thing,". We actually made it because of the findings we generated from our two year long, comprehensive study of how Ontario School Boards, public and Catholic, are interpreting these two pretty new grounds of human rights protection. So, gender expression and gender identity. Are these school boards understanding that these are different? Not usually, no. Are they understanding that their scope of applicability might be different? Not usually, no. Are the— are we seeing patterns of where school boards think they're, that the work of school people is affected? Yes. And that's not all of the things that actually are affected by, by removing gender expression, gender identity discrimination. So, all that is to say, we found a lot of gaps between how these grounds function and what they mean, and how policy— these documents that guide what school— school actors do, and how policy is interpreting them. So, we thought, there's a couple ways we can address that problem that we found. One of them is by just trying to connect with school boards to correct or to change or update their policies. Another one is to prompt what we like to call "Trickle Up" change. So basically, Gegi puts all of the information in the hands of a young person in a school, right. And hopefully their supportive adult, but they don't need a supportive adult to use [gegi.ca](http://gegi.ca). And puts the information in their hands, so they can walk into the principal's office and say, "Hey, this isn't how it should be going. This is how this should be going. And this is the data I have to back it up." So hopefully that'll prompt trickle-up shifts in how school boards understand this. So long winded, but there you are.

Tara: I think it's a terrific perspective to take, because when we were doing interviews with LGBTQ families about their experiences at school, it often was the young people who needed to start whatever initiative it was, whether it was a GSA or whether it was the beginning of demands for gender neutral

washrooms. It was often the students. So, what you have done is you've put all kinds of resources into the hands of students, so they can do that work with, you know, more power and with more confidence.

Lee: And, like, people who have access to the, the way of writing and corresponding and documenting and talking to power. So, we have, it's a project that draws from legal expertise and educational research expertise. So, we have created, we're creating a whole bunch of ways to support students, and hopefully their supportive adults, in using those kinds of tools. Like, how do you keep records? How do you follow up? How do you decide on action items in consultation with your principal? How do you refer to case law when you are making an argument for why something isn't right? So we are, we don't, I don't think personally that it should have to be on the students. I don't think that. But I do think that it is on the students and this generation of young people. Whether or not they're transgender, or gender non-conforming themselves, they, they tend to know way more about gender diversity and sexual diversity than a lot of the adults in their schools, just because of growing up with the internet and growing up with peers who are LGBTQ+. So, putting it in their hands isn't my first choice, but it usually already is. So, it's a very, it's a very tactical and realistic, I think, approach to the problem of the gap between what should be happening and what is happening.

Tara: There are folks who say, "If we want to really make headway around changing the way schools work with gender expression and gender identity, we should be talking to teachers", and I often hear you need to make sure that teacher education programs, you know, are inclusive of this kind of, of work. You and I have both worked for many decades in teacher ed. Can you talk a little bit about the role for teacher ed, in terms of making sure schools are doing better work with gender expression and gender identity? And the reasons you actually ended up putting most of your energy into providing tools for young people?

Lee: Oh, that's a great question. I do have another project that is focused just on teacher ed, but—

Tara: Oh, tell us about that, too!

Lee: But um, that, that's a great question. Because I think that, like I do pre-service teacher education, because I teach in the university. So, I integrate, I have a set of what I think about as competencies in relation to gender diversity that anchor my teaching, and one of them is being able to know what gender is and what it isn't, and what gender expression and identity are both— both conceptually in relation to human rights, and what they look like when they manifest in the classroom. And how systemic discrimination because of one of those is different from individual discrimination because of one of those, and how they're different from each other. So, I have a set of competencies that I integrate into my teaching in B.Ed. programs, and that I integrated into the professional development that I do, because I do quite a bit of that with teachers too. So that— I think it's really important for teacher education to be, to include that content, but I also think something I want to start working on is supporting, at least my program, if not others, in finding places in all courses where a genderqueer or gender non-conforming or transgender teacher candidate can see themselves represented, where gender diversity comes up as an issue like in legal— legal issues, and legal law, law and policy courses and

teacher ed, this stuff should be in there too. I don't teach those, but. So, I have all sorts— I think it's really important for teacher ed to have this. But I also think that this content for people who don't interface with transgender, like, spectrum communities on a regular basis, they might not know what they don't know. So, what I hope, I think I'm really interested in teacher ed. But what I hope is that what [gegi.ca](http://gegi.ca) does when Gegi wanders around Ontario with, in the pocket of various kids and their loved ones, and their supporting adults, that keys more and more and more and more teachers into knowing that they don't know, even if their hearts are great. And in the right place, they don't know stuff and there's stuff they need to know, right. So, it increases the general desire to know more, and to visit the site and to realize there's a whole area of practice that is being rethought, that you probably need to rethink. So that's why I'm turning to this quite tactical, putting stuff in the hands of kids and their family loved ones because I don't want teachers to just have sort of an educational relationship with this stuff. Like when they get their own training, I want them to really feel like this is coming up. It is part of my daily practice, it's emerging more and more, I'm having these highly— these highly informed students let me, and my colleagues know something's wrong, I must know. So, it's trying to increase the will to know, not just the willingness to receive training.

Tara: Can you talk a little bit about the design of the website, so it's meant to be accessible to youth who have questions about how they are going to navigate around their school. It's meant to be invitational to teachers who will visit probably after somebody in their school tells them that, that they need to support them. How did you design it so there are entry points for all of these folks?

Lee: Well, being that we began this with a budget of a relatively small research grant we didn't— we didn't begin the way I now realize we should've, which is with a, a user-experience expert and going through a journey of a user throughout the site. So, we tried to do that, and I think we have something that's very navigable and very good. I'm very proud of Gegi. But we have, we have a user experience consultant now and we're doing a lot of that visioning it. So, there's going to be a couple of, a couple of changes to how people use the site. But originally what we, what we did is we wanted to have people right off the bat, be able to feel like they know where to go. Because the experience of having someone, you know, people repeatedly misgender you, tell you, you don't, you shouldn't use that washroom. That's often, it's so common sensical, where that understanding comes from, that very sort of like cisnormative understanding of gender. It's phrased as so common sensical that the experience of receiving those messages just makes you feel like there's no— there's no— nowhere to go with that. That's just how it is. So, I really wanted, as soon as a visitor comes to [gegi.ca](http://gegi.ca), Gegi greets you, yes, they're right there. They're like "Hello!". Gegi greets you and says, "Cool, I'm here to help you. Let's figure out what you need". And the way we've interpreted that so far is that Gegi immediately takes you to a series of questions that get you to your own school board, and to a school board page for you, whether you're a teacher, or a school-based adult or a student, and then helps you find information. So, I immediately wanted to offer people a place to go. And once they found their place, and they see that there's a right for their situation for their school board, then they can look around a bit. And there's more things on the website that they can find and enjoy and learn from. But I really didn't want to replicate the experience of going to a school board website where you're having a problem, you click on this website, and most of them are very hard to navigate and require expertise that many students and

parents don't have. So, this is like, "Oh, we actually found the equity person. This is who you call. If there's no adults in your school or your family who you feel comfortable with sharing what you've learned here, this person is being called. Call this person." So— and take this piece of this one document to this person that we have already found for you. Right? So that— it's all about just making sure that people don't— it's to the best of our ability, and this is what some of the changes are going to be to really try to make it so that nobody comes to Gegi and keeps feeling lost.

Tara: Right, right. How come Gegi is a unicorn? Is there a theory behind that?

Lee: The unicorn is a symbol that has been associated with, with LGBTQ peoples and communities and for a very long time, it's a camp symbol. The unicorn is very campy, the unicorn is very, even if, even at its most masculine in its depictions, paintings and tapestries and cartooning, even at their most masculine, a unicorn is still a very beautiful and slightly feminine symbol because of the flowing mane and the gracefulness. And so, a unicorn is a symbol that brings a lot of our sort of cultural repertoire of gender to the fore. And Gegi. Gegi just is hilarious. I mean, we came up, my, my research partner, Dr. Kyle Kirkup, and I came up with Gegi, just like it says in the FAQ, and the frequently asked questions. We're saying Gegi! We kept saying G-E-G-I when we were doing our research, and one of us said, Oh my gosh, that's Gegi. We're like Gegi, then we just start going "Gigigigi" because we're queer people, and we relate in a campy, queer way to each other. And then we're like, oh, my gosh, what if Gegi is a unicorn? And then we just started thinking about this, like, very andro, non-binary unicorn, it was very flamey and fun and warm. And we just, it just made us so happy that when it came time to actually think how are we going to mobilize this, there's just a no brainer that Gegi would be the person. So, we do, we do hope, like when I, when I imagine someone coming to gegi.ca, like I do hope, or when they see a tote bag or T shirt or sticker, one of our social media pieces. I hope they see it and they go, unicorn. That's ridiculous. And I want, that's what I want, because I want it to draw you in and it draws— Gegi draws people in. And I think Gegi is hilarious and, and I'm— I'm very proud of that work. We worked with a wonderful artist out of Guelph named Cai Sepulis, who helped us create an androgynous Gegi, so shouts— props to Cai.

Tara: I'm sure now all of our listeners are going to want to go right to gegi.ca so that they can meet the unicorn, right? They can meet Gegi.

Lee: Gegi teaches you about gender expression, and gender identity, in Gigi's own voice. Which is ridiculous! And it should be, because we so often, we so often forget that for a lot of transgender, nonconforming people, like, our gender is not a struggle. Like it's not, right, it's— we aren't, we aren't, the struggle isn't that we struggle with who we are, it's that we face difficult things because of how we are. So, so, Gegi is, the fact that Gegi is so joyful and is so silly, and you can like be into Gegi and also roll your eyes at the same time be like, that's a ridiculous unicorn. Yes, they are a ridiculous unicorn. We don't, we don't have to just tell sad stories. We can also have like all these different feelings about, about gender diversity and about experiencing it. So that's why the unicorn.

Tara: Excellent. Have you had any feedback yet? It's been up for a while, what are folks telling you about their experience with Gegi?

Lee: Well, we get a lot of wonderful letters. Yeah, we get emails, just thanking us, from teachers from parents, of transgender, nonconforming kids, we receive a lot of, a lot of, we've had a lot of love on social media, on Twitter, a lot of people retweeting and supporting and expressing that they're so grateful this is happening. I have a lot of conversations with people who let me know that they are sharing it with parents and students, and who are finding it very useful. We've had an invitation from a couple of different organizations to collaborate in making it better-known to their membership, teachers, and stuff like that. So, we are looking for that kind of opportunity. So if any of your listeners are part of an organization that sort of speaks to Gegi's stakeholder groups, which are young people, teachers, and parents of transgender/nonconforming kids, if you have a connection with any of those groups, or you serve those groups, then we're happy to do a little— I'm happy to do a little visit and talk about the tool and let you know how, how it might be interesting to, to the people you serve. But yeah, so it's been a great response, we've had thousands and thousands of people visit.

Tara: Wonderful. Excellent.

Lee: We're very interested to see; I'm going to be doing an in-depth study for our next project on how the website's being used. So, part of that's going to look at the usage of the site and interpret where the interest is coming from. Because if we have, let's say, I'm going to pull around in my hat, but like, Rainy River District school, it's a very small board. But if we have a much more disproportionate percentage of people who are, who are from Rainy River, because that— we don't track them, but just by, we'd infer that from how, which pages they go to, the Rainy River pages, then we might have some interesting data to share with Rainy River, right? So, we're gonna select case studies using that data, and findings from other projects, we're gonna do all kinds of stuff to study how it's going. But my sense is that it is being well received among adults, and we're working on stuff to make it, make it something that definitely finds its way to kids, too.

Tara: So interesting. So, in its future work, you could imagine using the information you can gather from Gegi, to perhaps do some advocacy work with school boards, because if you know that a particular school board is getting a lot of visits, it says something to you about the work the school board might consider doing. And that could provide a really kind of compelling reason for school boards to choose to take up this work, right? Because there's already evidence that there is a desire from the people who are part of their— the communities they serve.

Lee: For sure, like if we have a school board that serves 4% of Ontario, K to 12 students, but is represented by you know, 15% of the page views on gegi.ca, then what we would infer is there is an elevated need in that board to the kind of information that Gegi has. And I would, I think what I would do with that, because we're in the middle, we're just beginning to think about the next steps that we can do, I would write to the director and say, "This is who I am. This is my project. And I invite you to look at this data and think and let me know if you'd like to talk about it because we are public servants.

And this is why we're here. So how can we help you now that we have this data? How can I support you and maybe figuring out what's going on, which I would happily do."

Tara: Excellent, excellent. Now, it's a personal question. You have a favourite part of the Gegi website and why is it your favourite? Or one of your favourites. It's hard to have a favourite.

Lee: No, I understand. I really like— I really like the, I like that we preserve so much of Gegi's irreverence, and I just like to click on the hamburger menu in the top corner and everything on unspools before you. I love that one of the headers is "For Funsies". The tagline is, "I'm fine, thanks. I just like unicorns!", and then you click on that, and you can go to a page of the Gegi's coloring page where Gigi is there, and they have a speech bubble and you can make Gigi say what you like. And then there's also stickers you can print out, download, and print if you have sticker sheets, so it's a... I really like that, I like that. It's playful. It's playful. I'm really proud of all the work that our team did to create the learning more about gender identity and gender expression section, there's some really helpful illustrations of what those look like. I think we did a good job of showing that there is a clear possibility of a cisgender person experiencing gender expression discrimination, and what that looks like, so. That was very, that way of teaching about that, through the text and through the audio recitation of the text. There's like a, there's two versions, there's for someone we see as an adult or an older youth or more expanded or advanced reader, there's a version for a younger person or less advanced reader. We call them "serious" and "sparkly". Yeah. So, I just I'm really proud of that differentiation we did, both of the reader and of the content and how we set it out. So yeah, I'm really proud of that page, too.

Tara: That's fantastic. Is there anything else you want to tell folks about Gegi?

Lee: Yeah, yes, we are, in the fall we're going to be launching Gegi en Francais aussi. So Gegi's gonna be out there and oh, all right, like we're, Gegi is being translated, but it'll be finished in the fall and to our knowledge, and based on some consultation we have had with, and relationships ongoing, we have with French and Francophone folks doing this kind of work in French and French language education. When Gegi is translated, Gegi will be probably the most comprehensive French Language Resource on gender diversity in Canada, and perhaps, internationally.

Tara: How exciting is that?

Lee: So that's, that's, we work with some wonderful translators and consultants, and I'm bilingual, but not to the extent that I, like I have learned, my bilingualism isn't as strong as when I was younger, but I have enough that I can come along and we're just we're piloting, we're modelling an approach to gender inclusive French, that is not rid of gender and is not doing nothing. That's kind of a steppingstone, because in French, it's very hard to do gender neutral language. So that's part of the website, that, there's going to be some sharing there about how we— our approach to the translation, and how that, how that was done and to guide others. So that's coming and the other big, and I've talked a little bit about the revamp of the pages, they're going to be more— the flow of the site will be a bit more user friendly. But the really big thing our team is doing is we are making a suite of, of what they call branch

learning scenarios in the instructional design world. So, the world where people create courses, particularly online courses, and it's going to be a beautifully illustrated, my student Cal Martin is a very talented artist, it's going to be a scenario— three different scenarios where you follow three different transgender or gender nonconforming students through their own advocacy process using Gegi's tools. So, we're making all these tools people can use. And we're showing them a story that they can navigate to see what happens when they use the tools.

Tara: That's amazing. And are those case studies coming from the experiences of people who have used this website?

Lee: No, because we don't know yet. They're coming from, from the composite knowledge held by our team as researchers and after years of research of what happens and so I'm— it just so happens because Gegi is as committed to cisgender folks experiencing discrimination as transgender folks. And so, I'm really excited that our first scenario that we're going to have completed in October, and that can, we'll be interacting website is actually of a ostensibly cisgender Muslim student who is, who is not permitted to participate in the synchronized swimming team at her school because of the dress code, right? Because she dresses modestly and wears hijab. So, it is... She is offered, "Why don't you just be the honorary assistant coach instead of performing with the team". And so, the first time, the first time Gegi goes out into the world and says this is what you can do with what we're making is actually not even for transgender students, it's for a student whose gender expression is being, is experiencing discrimination for her gender expression. Right, which is how she expresses her femininity, which is modestly. So that is, that's the first of the three that's gonna be in the world. So, we've always wanted to model that this is so much bigger than trans kids and to the extent we've had, like 99% bad faith pushback. It's been trying to limit what we're doing to helping children access medical transition. It's that, that bad faith pushback is very wrong, it's erroneous. It's not at all what Gegi does. But we don't have any anything to say about that in a person's life transition. But we— we do, we are definitely part of that social moment of trying to link everything about gender diversity, to saying yes or no about complicated complex medical decisions in a child's life. So that's been a less fun part of this is that bad faith response, but it's such a minority of what's happened that it's easy to not think about.

Tara: That's so exciting. Lee Airton, thanks so much for joining us today. I absolutely loved hearing you speak about Gegi, and I am sure it will continue to attract thousands of visitors from all over the country and as it has a chance to grow roots internationally all over the world. Dr. Lee Airton is an assistant professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies and Education at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. In 2012, they founded "They is my pronoun", a Q&A based blog about gender neutral pronoun usage and user support. Lee is also the founder of the No Big Deal campaign, a national social media initiative that has helped people show support for trans people's right to have their pronouns used. Lee's first book Gender: Your Guide, a gender friendly primer on what to know, what to say, and what to do in the new gender culture (And Lee and I did a podcast interview about this in an earlier season that you can go back to and listen to: it was featured in season one of this podcast) — this book offers practical steps for welcoming gender diversity in all areas of life. Lee is also the editor of Teaching About Gender Diversity: Teacher Tested Lesson Plans for the K to 12 classrooms with Dr. Susan Wooley. And Lee also spoke to us

about that book in season three. So Lee, after having you here for the third time, we now have three interviews with Lee Airton that you can find at [www.gendersexualitieschool.ca](http://www.gendersexualitieschool.ca). All right. That's our podcast for today. 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 musician 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.