

S4 — Episode 6 — What Australian Parents Want

Goldstein, Tara and Friesen, Doug (Producers). (2022, May 19) [Audio podcast]

Tara talks to Professors Tania Ferfolja and Jackie Ullman who are completing research project called What Parents Want. The project explores parents needs and desires around gender and sexuality education in their children's schools.

Tara: Hello and welcome to Gender Sexuality School. I'm Tara Goldstein and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. In November 2018, I travelled to Melbourne, Australia to work with my colleagues from Western Sydney University, Tania Ferfolja and Jackie Ullman. Tania and Jackie had been researching parents' perceptions of the inclusion and exclusion of gender and sexuality diversity education in K to 12 public schools in Australia. The study is funded by the Australian Research Council. In Season One, Tania and Jackie talked about the early findings from their research. Today on Gender Sexuality School, Tania and Jackie give us an update on what parents think about gender and sexuality education in their children's school. Tania and Jackie, welcome back to a Zoom meeting of Gender Sexuality School. We're very excited to hear about the progress of your research and what you found out. To get us going, can you tell us once again about the goals of your research project and the research questions you are asking and answering in your study?

Jackie: Thank you so much for having us, Tara. We're really happy to be here and to tell you about our work. So, the overarching aim of this work was to learn more about the attitudes of public-school parents to a relationships and sexual health curriculum that specifically includes gender and sexuality diversity and provides information that's directly relevant to the sexual health and relationships of this cohort. Here in Australia, we've had a great deal of public debate on the topic and associated moral panic generated by popular media sources, but not a whole lot of actual data, exploring what parents would like to see in the curriculum, and why. Our national survey is the first of its kind here in Australia, and we're pleased to report that our data is nationally representative, meaning that we can trust that our findings accurately represent trends in how the larger population of parents feels. Our total sample was almost 2100 parents. We wanted to know about why parents might or might not support an inclusive curriculum. As far as supports, we investigated parents' sense that an inclusive curriculum would advance equity in Australian society would enhance student well-being, would counteract histories of oppression of gender and sexuality diverse people, and was of personal importance to them and or their family. Where parents were opposed to inclusivity, we explored their sense that this curriculum was not quote unquote, age appropriate, that children were suggestible around these topics, and that it conflicted with their religious beliefs. We also asked parents about their sense of their own capacity for educating their children about these topics. Parents were asked about which gender and sexuality diversity inclusive curriculum top— sorry, topics should be included in their child's schooling, and at which stages of school from kindergarten through to Year 12. A complementary phase of data collection used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of parents of gender and sexuality diverse children and young people with respect to working with teachers, school leaders, and the broader parent community to support their children. We're using findings from these two phases of our

national study to design a professional development resource for teachers, using the voices of our participants to provide that sense of human connection and story above and beyond the statistics.

Tara: Such an exciting study. First of all, there are very few mixed method studies that really ask tough questions about gender and sexuality education. The fact that you had 2100 parents participate in a national way nationwide is extremely exciting. And your— your point about being able to trust that you really have, you know, really uncovered a whole range of responses really does seem, you know, quite— quite compelling given the numbers and how wide the scope of your research. Could you tell us a little bit more about the last component of the study, which was the qualitative study, and how you are going to use those findings to create some professional development materials.

Tania: Yeah, Tara, can I just before we get on to that, can I just tell you a little bit about, you know, the sorts of percentages that we got in terms of parental support, and, you know, the responses from the quantitative stuff. So basically, we found that out about 94% of parents actually want relationships and sexuality education delivered in government schools. I mean, there's nothing really new in that. I mean, we've had sexuality education happening in Australian schools for many, many years. But you know, what we did find, which is really very interesting was the fact that 82% of parents support the curriculum inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity topics for all school students from kindergarten through to Year 12. So that's pretty amazing. You know, we haven't really heard about that, that those sort of statistics before this work hasn't really been done on this scale before in Australia. So now we know, we know that despite what we hear in the media, about parents not wanting this sort of information, we know that actually, in schools, we know that actually 82% do want some form of sexuality and gender diversity taught in schools to their child. We also found out that most parents wanted to see gender and sexuality diversity introduced into the curriculum in primary school and the early years of high school. So, you know, contrary to popular belief that, you know, parents don't want it until well into high school if at all, you know, we're actually hearing that parents want it really quite early in schooling. And we also found out that the majority of parents support parents, schools, and teachers all being involved in relationships and sexuality education. So, you know, a sort of a more kind of a broader approach, I guess, to teaching about these things. So you know, so contrary to what we've been hearing in the media, you know, and from certain politicians in Australia over the last few years, our findings show that Australian parents largely support the teaching of sexuality and gender diversity in schools, and most feel quite comfortable about relationships and sexual health education reflecting the spectrum of human sexuality and gender. So, so just getting back to your question, you know, the qualitative stuff, qualitative component. So, we undertook some research with parents of gender and sexuality diverse young people, in relation to their experiences of negotiating the school context for, or with their child. So, so it was a qualitative component, which means we conducted some interviews, and we also ran an online forum that parents could respond to. And so our study found that although our, our parents found that the school, you know, the schools were supportive, a lot of the work that was done to actually create this support was actually done by the parents, and in some instance, the child, so and, you know, it's not every school, but, you know, a fairly large number of parents said that in relation to the, the overall sort of number of parents in the study. So, you know, if I can just give you an example, you know, parents would say, would advise teachers that the use of pejorative language that was

homophobic or transphobic was unacceptable, in an effort to ensure that their child felt welcome and not discriminated against. So, another example is like parents of gender diverse young people would take resources into their child's classroom to give to the teacher, so that, you know, the teachers would hopefully use them, and that way integrate gender— integrate gender and sexuality diversity into the classroom teaching practices as well. Okay. So basically, it was really interesting to see how much additional labor these parents undertook to ensure that their child's well-being while they're at school, you know, it was quite remarkable, and it illustrated that parents either didn't think the school was well-informed, or didn't think the school was doing enough, or at times, perhaps anything at all. And even that the school was, you know, they were doing, you know, they were trying to be supportive, but actually what they were doing was actually causing the child harm. So, you know, so many parents, I guess, you know, in the qualitative component felt that the schools are underprepared for diversity, particularly in relation to gender diversity.

Tara: Right. So, one of the key findings, then, is that parental advocacy seemed to be key in the, you know, task of making schools more welcoming for gender and sexual diverse students. And that's a finding that we found here too in our LGBTQ families speak out project in Ontario, that without parent advocacy, there wouldn't have been as much progress.

Tania: Absolutely. And you know, we all know that teachers are busy people and Australia in particular, there's a lot of, you know, climates that they have to, you know, fulfill, I guess, in their roles. But I think that, you know, from, from our study, I think what we found is that there really needs to be greater professional development, for teachers in schools around these kinds of issues, so that they feel comfortable. Sorry, Jackie, so that they feel comfortable and able to teach around gender and sexuality, diversity and be more inclusive.

Tara: Well, now just brought us to professional development, tell us a little bit about your plans for sharing your findings with teachers.

Jackie: Sure, so we are in the midst of— well, we've created a verbatim script based on the words of our participants, parents of gender and sexuality diverse young people. And at the moment, that script is sitting with a filmmaker. So, it's very, very exciting. We're going to have roughly a half hour long film based on the words of our parents participants. And then alongside that film, we're developing a professional development resource for teachers across primary and secondary schooling years, that kind of complements the resource, asks them to engage with some of the difficult questions that the resource brings up, and also points them to— in the direction of the available guidance documents, policies, curriculum opportunities in various states, etc. So, we're hoping that this resource will be, you know, nationally relevant, as well as we're going to be making it publicly available to teachers on our website, and of course, disseminating through all of our regular, you know, pathways, I suppose. Yeah.

Tara: So exciting. Because when you have resources, like a script, and film and accompanying classroom resources, there are lots of ways that teachers can begin to engage with your, your findings. It's still, I think, very unusual for researchers to ask parents what they want. And— and it's very exciting that was at

the heart of your study. So, in line with "what do parents want?", which is very different than what the media and some politicians think parents want, what advice did parents have for teachers who really want to do everything that they can to support gender and sexually diverse children in their classrooms and their schools?

Jackie: Well, one of the things that came up from parents was just how often schools were kind of giving messaging that communicated that they were really risk averse. They were concerned about, I guess what impact having these discussions in the classrooms might have more broadly. So, some parents talked about strategies of containment. And Tania was alluding to some of that in, you know, previously, when responding to your previous question. So, I just wanted to get that on the table, too. That was a really interesting finding, when parents communicated to us that schools, school leadership was kind of talking back to them and— in terms of legalities, you know, and legal responsibility and concerns about risk. So that was a theme that was prevalent in the data. The parents really were clear that they didn't want schools to be making decisions about what they would or would not include with respect to gender and sexuality diversity on the basis of assumptions of parental opposition. So, as Tania outlined, most parents supported these inclusions because they believe in children's right to knowledge, and they'd like to see Australian classrooms become more inclusive and safer for this cohort of students. Parents suggested that we could engage with school leadership about these topics more directly. So, while our research shows that parents want an inclusive curriculum, numerous complementary national studies in Australia, and I'm sure in Canada as well, outline the positive impact of an inclusive curriculum on education and well-being outcomes for gender and sexuality diverse students, and really, for all cohorts of students when they're encouraged to be, you know, inclusive of diversity of all forms of diversity. So, parents said that, you know, we could share these findings with school leadership and use them to help agitate for inclusion. Here in Australia, the Federal Student Wellbeing Framework directly aligned with goals to affirm diversity in Australian society. And if these larger scale policy directives exist, then these can be used alongside research findings to advocate for change.

Tania: I think we could add to that, sorry—

Tara: Yeah, please go-ahead Tania.

Tania: I was just gonna say, just in addition to what Jackie was saying, but, you know, I think parents really were keen to make it known that, you know, we need to recognize that there's a diversity of students in schools that need to be catered for. And, and, you know, they are there, and they have a right to a quality education that's equity driven, and then they need to have a safe and respected and inclusive and representative curriculum. You know, we never, you know, I think I said before, our world changes and evolves, and the diversity among young people and how they do their gender and their sexuality is quite different to what it might have been, you know, in my era when I was growing up, right. So, and I think, you know, for teachers, this diversity may be unfamiliar to them, you know, and so I think that they need to be educating themselves. And this is coming out from, from the study, you know, parents are saying teachers need to be able to educate themselves, about, you know, about this diversity, you know, who are they teaching? How can they accommodate the diversity in the classroom?

And, you know, how can they create an inclusive and supportive environment for every student? And where all students who are reflected in the curriculum, including gender and sexuality diverse students. So, you know, I think, you know, this idea that the belief that's out there among teachers, that parents will be hostile to such information inclusion, you know, it really just doesn't hold up anymore. And, you know, our research clearly showed that, you know, parents want their children to be educated so that their children can function effectively in this changing world. And, you know, education can be done in an age appropriate and meaningful way. And, you know, and I think schools need to serve all young people to give them the best possible chances in life. And I think that was really reflected in the qualitative findings of our study.

Tara: Which you've just, you know, pointed to is the power of a mixed methods approach, where you have statistics and numbers, you know, that actually help dispel common beliefs about what parents want, and then you have some, some very compelling, you know, qualitative data that really gives us direction for the way, the way forward. One of the things that I love to ask our researchers is to share an important moment in their research journey, something that you experienced, that you think made a big difference in how you thought about the research, or the way that you wanted to move ahead. I know I didn't ask you to prepare an answer to this question. But can you think of a moment that seemed to be important in your research journey? Either one of you, or both of you?

Jackie: Well, something that comes to mind really immediately is actually a moment quite early on in the design of our study. So, we wanted to push for really having an accurate sense of what parents wanted. And so, with that in mind, we needed— we knew we needed to move past a convenient sample, you know, many— lots of research in this field, in general, lots of research with— with queer people or queer families, you know, you kind of go for who you can get. And that research is, of course, valid, valuable, agitates for change, you know, there's strengths to that work. But we knew that for this national study, having a convenient sample of parents was not going to cut it. And so we made a decision quite early on to weight our sample of parents who were initially a convenience sample, you know, those were the parents that wanted to participate, but to weight that— that sample by a nationally representative population data sample of Australian parents, and in doing so, it gave us that additional power to say these results are nationally representative, we can trust them, they are trustworthy, you know, it's as close as we're ever going to get to a true nationwide sample of parents' attitudes on this topic. And that has made an enormous amount of difference with the messaging that we can draw from this work.

Tara: So, it's clear that early decision has really given you access to findings that you can do a lot of work with. Tania, was there an important moment for you that you can speak to?

Tania: Yeah, look, I think there were many kinds of critical moments and important moments, including when Jackie and I are asked to speak in Parliament around these issues. But one of the most exciting things, I think, for us out of this work is that, you know, we're working on this verbatim piece with you actually.

Tara: What a good time we've had!

Tania: Yeah! And to get this out in like this, you know, so often research scenes, you know, so far away from the everyday realities. You know, it's like, it's something completely foreign to many people, you know, statistics, all that sort of stuff. You know, they have a place and they're really good in terms of developing policy and that sort of thing, but in terms of people really understanding, how do we actually get people to understand the research findings? How do we disseminate them to everyday people? You know? And so, creating this verbatim performance piece, and putting it on a film and creating it as a resource for teachers, where we're actually using the voices of the participants in our study, you know, and their experiences are being heard firsthand, by the people who are watching it play, they do it as a play, or watching, watching a film. You know, to me, that's so exciting. And, you know, we have had some readings, early readings of, of the script. And people are really, really excited about what, you know, the potential that this kind of work can have. So, I think from, from our perspective, you know, that's another really key point. And, you know, we really can't wait for this resource to be out there and circulating amongst teachers and whoever actually wants to just have a look and to hear the voices of, from parents.

Tara: Well, I certainly share your excitement. And we'll so, so look forward to when the resources are available. And we can start using them here in Canada and begin an international comparative kind of approach to how to work with sexual and gender diversity education. As we close up, are there any final words you'd like to say about your experience or about the study? Any final thoughts?

Tania: Yeah, look, I think, I think that it's... Look, I think it's really important work, to be honest, you know, to be that, you know, in a nutshell, you know, it's work that hasn't been done before. It's internet, it's nationally based, you know, and it's dealing with a topic that really hasn't very well, not very well researched, but very, there's not a lot of research out there about it. So, you know, so I guess, you know, I feel very confident that this will actually, as time goes on, we will actually make a difference for what is actually being done in schools around gender and sexuality diversity.

Jackie: I'd just like to add that, I think, you know, being a parent is difficult work in the best of times. Right? And we've got, we, we spoke to parents who were incredibly generous with us, you know, and told us about the additional labor that they engaged in on a regular basis just for the basic safety of their children and just the basic— basic recognition of their children. That is a right of families, you know, and for me, I think that's just really the, the parting message that I have is just that, as educators, our job in loco parentis is to make sure that, that kids are recognized, affirmed, visible and safe. And we're just so grateful to the generosity of these families that came and told us their stories.

Tania: Yeah, absolutely.

Tara: Tania and Jackie, thanks so much for joining us. I so loved hearing about your project, and what Australian parents have to say about the inclusion and exclusion of gender and sexuality education in their schools. You've taught us a lot today and we're looking forward to hearing a little more later on about the impact of your work. Tania Ferfolja is an associate professor in the School of Education at

Western Sydney University. Her research centres on equity in education with a focus on gender and sexuality diversities and curricula, policy, pedagogy, schooling and employment practices in Australia and internationally. Jackie Ullman is also an Associate Professor in the School of Education at Western Sydney University. Jackie does mixed methods research about issues of school climate, school based social relationships and belonging as they relate to marginalized secondary school students. Tania and Jackie's most recent book, published in 2020, is called *Gender and Sexuality Diversity in a Culture of Limitation: Student and Teacher Experiences in Schools*. The book is available for free online through Routledge. Tania and Jackie are writing a new book called *Understanding Parents' Perceptions of Gender and Sexual Diversity in the Classroom: Allied, Opposed or Unsure*. The book will be published by Routledge. If you want to know more about Tania and Jackie's research, please visit their website at westernsydney.edu.au/gsds. That's westernsydney.edu.au/gsds. Alright, that's our podcast for today. This episode was produced with the support of the New College Initiative Fund and from Doug Friesen. 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.