



The Experiences of LGBTQ Families in Ontario Schools: 2014-2020
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

www.lgbtqfamiliespeakout.ca

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Final Report

Prepared by Tara Goldstein, Principal Investigator
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Goal of the Study

The goal of this research study is to interview lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) families living in four different regions in Ontario about the issues they experience at school and how they work with teachers and principals to create safer and more supportive learning environments for their children.

We use the initialism LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer) with the intention of including people who identify as transgender, transsexual, two-spirit, questioning, intersex, asexual, ally, pansexual, agender, gender queer, gender variant, and/or pangender. We understand the names people use to describe their gender and sexual identities are always evolving and that the most important thing is to be respectful and to use names that people prefer.

Research Questions

The study asked and answered two research questions:

1. Two to seven years after the passing of the Ontario Safe School Act (2012), what do LGBTQ families say about their experiences in public schools?
2. How are LGBTQ families working with teachers and principals to create safer and more supportive learning environments for their children?

To answer these questions, the research team:

1. conducted video interviews with 37 LGBTQ families living in the cities of Toronto, Ottawa, Sudbury and London, as well as in suburban and rural communities located close to each city;
2. analysed the issues and conflicts LGBTQ face in schools and the work families do with teachers and principals to create safer and more supportive learning environments for their children.

To share our findings the research team has:

1. curated, tagged and uploaded the video interviews onto our website LGBTQ Families Speak Out (www.lgbtqfamiliespeakout.ca) and used the interviews in professional development workshops and courses for educators and LGBTQ families;
2. developed *Out at School*, a 90-minute multi-media theatre production which includes a verbatim theatre script, visual images and music based on the interviews that we have performed for numerous audiences and which can be used in professional development workshops and performances for educators, LGBTQ families and communities and the general public;
3. published scholarly articles for teacher education and arts-based educational research journals;
4. included findings from the study in Tara Goldstein's book *Teaching Sexuality and Gender at School: Letters to Teachers* (2019) published by Routledge;
5. created a podcast to supplement the interviews on our website and the teaching work we do with the interviews.

Participants in the study

Participation in this study, between 2014 and 2018, has been dynamic, and the criteria for participating has expanded based on requests from the communities engaging with the project.

To illustrate, when the team first began interviewing LGBTQ families in 2014 we restricted our interviews to parents who identified as LGBTQ themselves. However, at the Rainbow Health Conference in Sudbury in March 2018, the team met parents who identified as heterosexual and cisgender but were raising children who identified as LGBTQ. Some of these parents talked about their families as LGBTQ families because their children identified as LGBTQ. Others did not. When some of these heterosexual and cisgender parents asked to participate in the study, the team interviewed them.

Then, in the fall of 2018, when the team introduced the interviews to the undergraduate students in Tara Goldstein's Equity, Activism and Education course at the University of Toronto, several students who identify as LGBTQ youth of colour reported they would like to hear more families of colour of talk about their experiences at school. The research team then intentionally recruited more families of colour to participate in the study.

Findings

Acceptance vs Activism at School

- While some of the families spoke about the need for “acceptance” in Ontario schools, other spoke about the need for “activism”.
 - Families who discussed the need for *acceptance* at school talked about the ways individual teachers could support LGBTQ families and students. They also talked about the need for educators to do more self-reflection and learning about LGBTQ families. Finally, they spoke about the need for curriculum that reflected the needs of LGBTQ families (see “Curriculum”);
 - Families who discussed the need for *activism* talked about using resources from the Ontario Human Rights Commission, school board guidelines and policies and legal frameworks to support their children. In addition to using approaches available through existing institutional frameworks, several parents discussed the importance of grassroots community organizing and action to create safer, more positive and queer classrooms (Goldstein et al. 2007) for their families;
 - In response to watching the video clips of families talking about the need for acceptance and activism in schools, undergraduate Equity Studies student Benjamin Swadon (2018) had this to say:

While I appreciate the efforts made by individual teachers and educators working in their roles, I want to emphasize the importance of grassroots community organizing for applying the necessary public pressure on institutions to fundamentally change. Although teachers can still take advantage of their relative positions of power to help apply this pressure, the work of individuals is severely limited if it is not part of a larger community struggle. The results of the Experiences of LGBTQ Families in Ontario Schools suggest that the most effective strategy to support LGBTQ families and students is to take up common cause alongside community members to support larger institutional changes from the grassroots (p.7) (see “School Board and School-Wide Commitments” and “Teachers’ Work”).

Advice for Teachers

- One recurring piece of advice from parents and students to teachers is to “just listen” to what students and families tell you about their lives. Listening to the ways that students talk about their gender identities was identified as particularly important. Several families wanted teachers to know that
 - gender is fluid;
 - “there are no rules” to gender identity (Reiff Hill and Mays 2013);
 - sometimes students’ gender identities change, and
 - sometimes students may shift between different pronouns;

Teachers need to provide students with space to try of different identities without facing judgement.

- Another recurring piece of advice to teachers is to acknowledge the multiple intersections that make up the personal identities of their students. By recognizing the multiple, simultaneous identities students bring to school teachers can increase the depth with which they connect with children and their families (see “Intersecting Identities”)

Bullying

- Despite the passing of the Ontario Safe School Act in 2012, several LGBTQ families in communities both within and outside of the cities of Toronto, Ottawa and Sudbury report their schools are still not addressing incidents of homophobic and transphobic bullying;
- One family has chosen to homeschool their transgender child until they find a safer school for them.

Coming out

- Both parents and children make strategic decisions about if, when, and how to “come out” about living in a LGBTQ family depending on whether or not they believe coming out is safe. Decisions about coming out can shift over time and place.

Curriculum

While many (but not all) schools discussed in the interviews have Gay Straight Alliances, participate in Pink Shirt Day (an annual day to raise awareness about bullying), and have books about LGBTQ families in their classrooms, only one school discussed in the 36 interviews has created and delivered LGBTQ-positive classroom curriculum.

- Several families discussed the importance of having their LGBTQ family lives represented in the school curriculum. Parents raising transgender and non-binary children discussed need for school curriculum to represent the lives of their children (see “Advice for Teachers”).
- The *Toronto District School Board Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students and Staff* provides teachers and families with informative resources to increase awareness and understanding of gender diversity and inclusivity at school (The Toronto District School Board, 2013). For example, the *Guidelines* provide teachers and families with language to talk about gender diversity and inclusivity at school

Intersecting Identities

- Multiple and simultaneous identities that LGBTQ families bring to school can impact their experiences at school. For example:
 - A Chicana lesbian mother talked about how her masculine gender performance had outed her four-year daughter as a child from a LGBTQ family.
 - A Black parent talked about the racial marginalization their daughter was experiencing at school and how their daughter had asked them not to come out to her teachers and friends at school because she was worried about being further marginalized.
 - A white Catholic lesbian mother, working as a teacher in a Catholic secondary high school, discussed the preparation that had undertaken with her daughter’s religion teacher to ensure her daughter would not feel marginalized by having two mothers.
 - Two families with members who identify as Indigenous and Two-Spirit talked about how the lack of teacher knowledge and the lack of teacher interest in the history of residential schooling, and current Indigenous issues alienated their children and required them as parents to teach this history at home.

Parent’s Work

- Parents, children and youth have to advocate for themselves and their families when there is no or little school or individual teacher commitment.

School Board and School-Wide Commitments

- School-wide commitments to the inclusion of LGBTQ families are rare;
- Some school boards still do not have policies in place to support transgender children.

Teachers' Work

- Gay Straight Alliances, Pink Shirt Day activities, and the collection of books about LGBTQ families happen because of the work by *individual* teachers (and sometimes vice-principals and principals) who are committed to creating safer and more supportive learning environments for LGBTQ families and students;
- Teachers often rely on the support of LGBTQ families to create safer, more supportive practices at school;
- Teacher allyship makes a difference to families who are raising transgender children (see Goldstein et. Al 2018 in publication list below);
- Families who identify as heterosexual and cisgender and are raising a transgender child talk about the need to access the LGBTQ community for support and resources. They also talk about the need to become allies, advocates and allies for their transgender children and other members of trans communities.

Sharing our findings

To date the team has:

1. Shared the video interviews uploaded on our website LGBTQ Families Speak Out (www.lgbtqfamiliespeakout.ca) with students in undergraduate and graduate courses at the University of Toronto since 2016. Over 500 students have worked with the interviews so far.
2. Performed our multi-media verbatim theatre production *Out at School* for over 500 people locally and internationally between 2017 and 2019 including:
 - Three different local audiences of LGBTQ families and the general public as a Toronto Pride community event in Toronto, Ontario in June 2019;
 - an international audience of LGBTQ families and the general public at The L Fest in Llandudno, Wales in July 2018;
 - an audience of middle school students at Northlea Elementary and Middle School in Toronto, Ontario, in May 2017;
 - an audience of educators at the Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexuality Diversity Conference in Toronto, Ontario, in April 2017;
 - an audience of LGBTQ families and the general public at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto, Ontario, in January 2017.

3. Shared our process of creating *Out at School* in two episodes of Tara Goldstein's podcast series called Gender. Sexuality. School. which is available on our website <http://www.lgbtqfamiliespeakout.ca/podcast.html>

Season 1-Episode 7: Queer Songs and Songwriting

Season 1-Episode 8: Queer Visual Storytelling

4. Shared our findings and placed our findings in conversations with other research about gender, sexuality and school in several episodes of our podcast series:

Season 1-Episode 1-Living in the New Gender Culture

Season 1-Episode 2- Queering Curriculum Through Music

Season 1-Episode 3: Teaching About Gender in Middle School.

Season 1-Episode 4-*Letters to Teachers*

Season 1-Episode 5-What Parents Want

Season 1-Episode 6- Queer is my Family

Season 1-Episode 9- Queering Sex Education

5. Shared our findings in presentations at several national and international academic conferences:

An asterix (*) indicates the author is an undergraduate or graduate student at the University of Toronto and is a member of the research team.

2019

Goldstein, T., *Baer, P., *Koecher, A., *hicks, b.l., *Reid, K., *Ga'al, E. and *Owis, Y., Walkland, T. (2019). Multiple and Simultaneous Identities in LGBTQ Families and Experiences at School. Division G: Social Context of Education. *American Educational Research Association*. Toronto, ON.

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2018

Goldstein, T. *Baer, P., *Salisbury, J., *hicks, b.l., *Reid, K., and *Koecher, A. (2018). *Out at School: A Verbatim Theatre Project about the Experiences of LGBTQ Families in School*. Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) SIG. *American Educational Research Association*. New York, NY.

*Koecher, A., Goldstein, T. *Baer, P., *Salisbury, J., *hicks, b.l., and *Reid, K. (2018). Learning about Other People's Families from Other People's Families. Division K, Section 5: Preservice Teacher Education Coursework. *American Educational Research Association*. New York, NY.

2017

*Koecher, A., Goldstein, T., *Baer, P., *hicks, b.l., *Joshi, T, and *Salisbury, J. (2017) LGBTQ Families Speak Out. *Canadian Critical Pedagogy Association (CCPA), Canadian Society for Studies in Education (CSSE)*. Toronto. May 2017.

Goldstein, T., *Baer, P., and *Salisbury, J. (2017). *Out at School: A Verbatim Theatre Project about the Experiences of LGBTQ Families in Ontario Schools. Arts Researchers and Teachers Society (ARTS), Canadian Society for Studies in Education (CSSE)*. Toronto. May, 2017.

Goldstein, T., *Baer, P., and *Salisbury, J. (2017). *Out at School: A Verbatim Theatre Praxis Workshop about the Experiences of LGBTQ Families in Ontario Schools. Canadian Association of Theatre Research Conference*. Toronto. May 2017.

Goldstein, T., *Koecher, A., *hicks, b.l., *Baer, P. (2017). The Experiences of LGBTQ Families in Schools. *Lesbian Lives Conference*. Brighton, England. February 25, 2017.

6. Published our findings in a book, a book chapter, and several academic journal articles:

Book

Goldstein, T. (2019). *Teaching Gender and Sexuality at School: Letters to Teachers*. New York, NY: Routledge. With contributions by *benjamin lee hicks, *Jenny Salisbury and *Pam Baer.

Book Chapter

Goldstein, T., *Salisbury, J., *hicks, b.l., *Reid, K., *Koecher, A., and *Baer, P. (2018). Inviting Startling Empathy Through Performed Ethnography: A Queer(ed) Collective Research Project. In Gallagher, K. (Ed.) *The Methodological Dilemma: Creative, Critical and Collaborative Approaches to Qualitative Research*. New York: Routledge.

Refereed Journal Articles

*Baer, P., *Salisbury, J. and Goldstein, T. (2019). *Out at School: Extending “Startling Empathy” Through Image Theatre. Education Forum 83(4):481-431.*

Goldstein, T., *Koecher, A., *Baer, P., and *hicks, b.l. (2018). Transitioning in elementary school: Advocacy and allyship. *Teaching Education Journal* 29(2):165-177.

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Goldstein, T., Russell, V. and Daley, A. (2007). Safe, Positive and Queering Moments in Teaching Education and Schooling; A Conceptual Framework. *Teaching Education Journal*, 18(3)183-199.

Reiff Hill, May and Mays, Jeff (2013). *The Gender Book*. Houston, TX: Marshall House Press.

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The Toronto District School Board (2013). *Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students and Staff*. Toronto: Toronto District School Board.