

INTEGRAL Season Three: Gender Justice and The Common Good

Bannan Institute, Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, Santa Clara University

“Gender Justice Through the Eyes of Children”

**Sonja Mackenzie, Assistant Professor, Public Health Program, Bannan Institute
Scholar, Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, Santa Clara University**

October 24, 2017

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Welcome to INTEGRAL, a podcast production out of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University; exploring the question: Is there a common good in our common home?

I'm Theresa Ladrigan-Whelpley, the director of the Bannan Institutes in the Ignatian Center and your host for this podcast. We're coming to you from Vari Hall on the campus of Santa Clara in the heart of Silicon Valley, California. This season of INTEGRAL, we're looking at the ways in which issues of gender justice intersect with our pursuit of the common good.

STEPHANIE WILDMAN: Society needs to acknowledge gender.

PATRICK LOPEZ-AGUADO: We can see clear evidence of the dangers involved in socializing practices that tie masculinity to power.

SHARMILA LODHIA: While there is a long history of feminist activism in India and a vibrant advocacy community working to address gendered violence in the region, there was something different happening here.

SONJA MACKENZIE: We must build movements in solidarity with those whose equal dignity is unequally endangered as we address the pressing societal, moral, and ethical dimensions of gender justice.

MYTHRI JEGATHESAN: Do they see women as extractive commodities and subordinated clients to patriarchal patrons? Or do they see them in the context of their desires and aspirations for the future?

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: To unpack these issues, we're joined today by Sonja Mackenzie, Assistant Professor in the Public Health Program at Santa Clara, and Bannan Institute Scholar in the Ignatian Center. Her book, *Structural Intimacies: Sexual Stories in the Black AIDS Epidemic*, examines intersections of gender, sexuality, and racism. One of her current projects looks at the work of community advocacy and transformation in relation to LGBTQ rights among school-aged children and their families. Welcome, Sonja.

SONJA MACKENZIE: Thanks, Theresa. It's great to be here. Questions of gender justice are particularly important right now. This year, we have experienced unprecedented attacks on the rights of transgender young people, including the Trump administration's rolling back of protections for transgender students in schools. This means that transgender students no longer have federal protections to use a public school restroom that matches their gender identity.

GAVIN GRIMM [Audio clip]: "I'm not really sure how using the bathroom became national news. I thought it was a pretty simple concept that could be solved quickly and privately."

GAVIN GRIMM [Audio clip]: "All I want to do is be a normal child, and use the restroom in peace, and I have had no problem from students to do that, only from adults."

SONJA MACKENZIE: We just heard the words of Virginia teenager Gavin Grimm summing up his struggle to access the bathroom as a transgender teenager in his high school. Grimm was named one of Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People for 2017 after suing his high school district and becoming a visible advocate for transgender rights.

Despite this and the ongoing injustices transgender communities experience, we've seen the incredible leadership of young transgender people, including Gavin Grimm. There are also many individuals who are not in the public eye who risk their lives every day to be themselves.

For me this raises the pressing question - What are we doing as a society to support transgender and gender expansive young people and adults? What does it mean to advance a common good in our common home - a world committed to gender justice in more than

just words, but also in actions? Taking the lens of gender justice means, to me, that we actively work to create the conditions for institutions from the ground up to support communities being and becoming who they are. I'm interested in, what forms of action and social change are needed to realize a common good, when so much is at stake?

Children negotiate gender in their lives as soon as they start coming into an awareness of themselves. They experience gender's possibilities – as well as the social regulations of gender – from their earliest years.

More and more children are resisting binary frames of gender and identifying as transgender or gender expansive at earlier ages. We know that almost one in ten elementary school students (or 8%, to be exact) report that they do not conform to traditional gender norms.

I believe that schools are particularly important spaces for gender justice. Schools are an important first “common home” - outside of the family home - for many children. Schools reflect culturally prescribed norms of socialization. In essence, we can view schools as a microcosm through which society becomes learned and also unlearned. Schools are spaces with incredible potential for community and solidarity, and also potential for harm.

Around gender, we know that elementary school students who do not conform to traditional gender norms are almost twice as likely to be made fun of or bullied at school as other students. Adults and teachers are an important part of this picture as well. One third of elementary school teachers say that they're uncomfortable responding to student questions about transgender people, and three quarters of transgender students feel unsafe at school because of their gender expression. Nearly three quarters avoid bathrooms because they feel unsafe or uncomfortable.

These are just some of the serious and immediate health consequences faced by transgender and gender expansive youth. So - there's still a lot we have to do.

We set out to hear from a group of elementary school children what their understandings and experiences of gender are. We wanted to hear from elementary school children

because, despite a growing public discourse on gender and shifts toward fluid understandings of gender, we've not yet centered the voices of our youngest community members.

CHILD 1 [AUDIO CLIP]: When I first realized my gender, I was in nursery school. Ok, I think this was how I first found out. I'm pretty sure when I was in nursery school or something like that, we were playing this game, and they said boys on this side and girls on that side, and so I just went to the girls' side, and I guess I just figured out I was a girl from that.

SONJA MACKENZIE: This project asks how we can build more inclusive school environments where children can come into their fully gendered selves.

My co-researcher is a Kindergarten teacher in a local elementary school, who explains here a bit more about how our project was structured.

ASHLEIGH TALBOTT [Audio Recording]: Fourteen kids, ages 5 through 11, were equipped with cameras to document gender through their eyes and hearts. Student photographers took pictures, and recordings, then using the Photovoice participatory methodology, which is used to support social change, developed narratives around their experiences and understandings of gender. Student photographers were kids in LGBTQ families, gender expansive kids, and allies.

Some of the questions that student photographers came up with are: Have you ever been mis-gendered? Where can I be my most gendered self? Are there places where I feel boxed in?

CHILD 2 [AUDIO CLIP]:

Child: I was born as a boy. I am half boy, half girl.

Ashleigh: How does it make you feel when people tell you who you are?

Child: Kind of sad.

Ashleigh: Because why?

Child: Because they make me go into the girl's bathroom, but I just wait.

Ashleigh: Why do you wait?

Child: I wait until they leave so that they don't see and then tell on me.

SONJA MACKENZIE: Here is a Kindergartener who has not been able to go to the bathroom at school for fear of being regulated by children and adults alike. A five-year old should have the basic right to access a bathroom.

A key part of our work was to bring students together with different experiences of gender in their lives and families. Children who were gender expansive and in LGBTQ parented families invited their friends to participate, inviting solidarity. They built a community around gender, making space for everyone in the community to be heard and to express themselves visually and through their stories.

They were recognizing that the work of gender is not just the work of those who live outside normative gender boxes. The work of gender is all of ours to shoulder.

Children built a shared language, starting with basic definitions and critical understandings of gender.

This ally identifies with clear language how all children on the gender spectrum should be able to use the bathroom.

CHILD 3 [AUDIO CLIP]: There is a girl's bathroom sign and a boy's bathroom sign at my school. I think there should be all gender bathrooms because I don't think it's fair to people who don't feel like a boy or a girl. People might get teased in the bathroom they feel like going in. People...think that only a boy should go in the boy bathroom and girls should go in the girl bathroom. We should have bathrooms that everybody, wherever they are on the spectrum, can go into and feel safe. People can feel happy and not upset and scared.

SONJA MACKENZIE: When we build true opportunities for dialogue and action, the contested terrain of the bathroom becomes something that all children can demonstrate solidarity around. This is not just an issue, then, that gender expansive children, or their families, have to take on by themselves.

PARENT 1 [AUDIO CLIP]: I don't want to be the parent that's always screaming out about "my kid my kid my kid." I want all the kids to have a safe place, and so it's from two sides that I don't have to do all the work, that we have this support. This program was able to put the kids' voices about gender out there. I saw the office manager going through the exhibit; and I see other people asking questions and talking about it. It doesn't have to be something that's coming from top down, like oh, we're going to have all these rules, and be so PC. It's because these are real kids and they're feeling these real things. They're not necessarily very comfortable conversations for people.

ASHLEIGH TALBOTT [Audio Recording]: A safe environment, multiple perspectives of community members, communicative relationships and thoughtful bridges built, provided a space to support student photographers' development of critical thinking around gender, as well as ally-ship, an important piece of our work together.

SONJA MACKENZIE: Even beyond their collective work to build a common good in their common home of the school community, is there a role for the broader community – in this case, outside the school – for a gendered common good in elementary schools?

Youth from the local high school Gender Spectrum Alliance came to the group, building ally-ship among older and younger children. Children in the group also identified forms of cross-generational ally-ship with transgender adults in the community.

CHILD 4 [AUDIO CLIP]: When my Uncle Zak walks into a room, sometimes people mistake him for a girl. Then he will tell them that he's actually a boy. Even after he tells them his pronoun, people still say she/her/hers. That makes him feel pretty annoyed and maybe a little bit angry and sad. If you're going to use somebody's pronouns, you should always ask them or just use they! Gender is in your heart, not other people's heads.

Uncle Zak wants transgender kids to know that there are lots of transgender adults around that love them and want to give them support. He wants you to know that you can be who you are, and to find people who understand you and love you and see you for who you are (your allies). Your allies are here to help you advocate for what you need!

SONJA MACKENZIE: Broadening our common home – beyond the walls of the school – changes the space for all of us. The liberation of all of us is connected. These forms of allyship reconfigure our way of being in relationship with one another. In this sense, our work for gender justice has the potential to transform how we understand ourselves and each other.

The embodied states of gender present possibilities for individual and collective experiences of being who we are; and call us with a particular urgency to address the injustices that we face. We must build movements in solidarity with those whose “equal dignity is unequally endangered” as we address the pressing societal, moral and ethical dimensions of gender justice (O’Neill, 1994, cited in Heyer: 8).

Considering gender as a common good allows us to consider the publicly structured production of gender, instead of the typically individualized and individualizing narratives our society has about gender. We cannot leave the work of social change to communities who are oppressed by our social norms and institutions. We must work to build a common good as a necessary space for gender justice.

This project asked school community members to consider the role of children’s voices in re-focusing our collective attention at this historical moment. Within months after these children lined the school’s halls with images and narratives of gender, the school had constructed two all-gender bathrooms. This group of young gender justice leaders presented the school not just with their visions of hope, but they contributed to concrete change in their school. They have created a common good of the most basic form – access to the bathroom – in their common home, paving the way to equity and inclusion for gendered futures.

Consider what you can do to follow the openings of gender that children present for us. Consider how you can actively work to create gender inclusion in our schools, in our homes, and in our society to create a world in which all children are able to come into their fully gendered selves.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Thanks for listening to INTEGRAL, a Bannan Institute podcast of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University. Special thanks to Sonja Mackenzie for her contribution to today's episode. Coming up next week is Mythri Jegathesan, who will be exploring gender justice issues in the formal and informal labor economies of Sri Lanka.

Technical direction for INTEGRAL was provided by Fern Silva and Tim Rose. Our Production Manager is Kaylie Erickson. Our Production Assistant is Manuel Sanchez. Thanks to Mike Whalen for advisory and editorial support. You can find us on the web at scu.edu/integral, or subscribe via iTunes, SoundCloud, Stitcher, or Podbean.