

Keep Yourself Alive: Welcoming the Next Generation of Queer and Trans Educators

Harper Keenan

Dear new queer/trans¹ educator,

Welcome to the work of education. I am glad that you are here to take part in the wonderfully challenging task of supporting young people to learn more about how we might *be together*. I often think of classrooms and other educational spaces as something like a dance floor, where people who may not know one another gather together and learn how to interact and relate to one another in shared space.

While the word “educator” might be a new way of orienting yourself, chances are that you have been practicing a kind of education for a long time. Those who now call themselves queer and trans people have been teaching the world since before those words even existed—the acceleration of queer language development and reclamation over the last century is but one example. You have important knowledge to bring to the work of education.

Queer and trans communities have historically embodied ways of being and relating that go beyond the categories written onto our lives. To paraphrase the timeless words of Rihanna (Harris, 2011), we have found love in hopeless places. We have built ambiguous friendships in classrooms, hatched plans in hallways, studied books in library corners, lusted after each other on school trips. To do so, many of us have broken the rules.

People may tell you that your work as a queer/trans educator will be difficult. They’re not wrong. Education is not easy, in part because relationships are not easy. Yet the reasons why your work as a queer/trans educator may be difficult—particularly within schools or other institutions—probably have less to do with you as an individual than with the kind of society that has been built around you and the way you are interpreted within it. Here, I am reminded of Queen’s song, “Keep Yourself Alive” (May, 1973), which I include in the title of this letter:

*I was told a million times of all the troubles in my way
Mind you grow a little wiser, little better every day
But if I crossed a million rivers and I rode a million miles
Then I'd still be where I started, bread and butter for a smile
Well I sold a million mirrors in a shop in Alley Way
But I never saw my face in any window any day
Now they say your folks are telling you to be a superstar
But I tell you just be satisfied and stay right where you are*

What I take from this song is the importance of self-determination. As critical trans scholar and activist Eric Stanley (2014) writes, self-determination has been theorized within a variety of anti-colonial, Black freedom, prison abolition, and queer and trans social movements. Self-determination is portrayed as a

¹ These words are always incomplete in their description of human embodiment and ways of being. I use them as a placeholder for an infinite galaxy. My use of the slash symbol in “queer/trans” does not suggest a separation or a conflation of the two terms (some trans people are queer, others are not). Rather, I use it as a symbol for the complex relational exchange between them.

kind of escape route out of the limited parameters of institutional recognition that demand conformity to legible categories of identity. In other words, schools, laws, institutions, and other people cannot define who you are. You do not have to, as the song says, “sell mirrors.” You do not have to exhaust yourself in trying to “get better” in some essential sense by forcing yourself to be more explainable to those who do not understand you. Instead, you may find power in refusing to consent to those terms. The song continues:

*I was told a million times
Of all the people in my way
How I had to keep on trying
And get better every day*

*But if I crossed a million rivers
And I rode a million miles
Then I'd still be where I started
Same as when I started*

*Keep yourself alive
Come on
Keep yourself alive
It'll take you all your time and money
Honey you'll survive*

In these verses, I hear the exhaustion of endless hurdles and the sweetness of giving up on them to choose a different path. Let me be clear: I do not want to suggest that you give up on education, but that you allow yourself to be creative in how you think about it. Consider that—that which is illegible to the mainstream may be precisely your gift. Who are you and what knowledge do you bring to others? What do you want to keep alive, to strengthen? What knowledge do you and your students have that seems unsayable or too complicated? What are you are asked to set aside? How can you keep yourself alive?

For queer and trans people, the power of strategic defiance cannot be underestimated (Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020). Many schooling systems were designed for the creation of an ideal citizenry that explicitly sought to erase ways of being that resisted conformity. Though not without serious and sometimes deadly cost, queerness and transness have survived the institutions that have often been intent on their destruction. We have always found ways toward what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2010) call being “in study” with each other—the kind of self-organized fugitive learning that takes place beyond the parameters of formal curriculum and instruction.

I want to offer you a parable of survival, a wayfinding story to keep in your back pocket like a bandana. Queer and trans stories are sometimes difficult to come by (though they start to appear everywhere once you look for them). This is partly because many queer and trans people are not raised by queer or trans adults. We build networks of chosen family as we make our way into queer communities. While those connections may overlap with the family we were born into, the difference is that queer/trans communities are largely formed through desire rather than dictated by assignment. Sometimes we find these relationships in classrooms and schools. Maybe that is where you will find this letter.

In an effort toward greater intergenerational connection, I present a story of 50 years of queer and trans pedagogies. A blend of political history and a personal account of how I have fought to keep myself alive,

it is loosely organized through the chronology of the five decades since Stonewall, marked with headings that indicate the passage of decades from 1969 to the present. These are stories that have helped my queer and trans body and its future-dreams to survive. Of course, they are bound together through my own understanding and limitations. Your stories will be different and I hope I will get to hear them one day. I aim to give you this collection as a kind of anchor that has held me. Feel free to keep it, or let it go.

1969

As you likely know, the Stonewall uprising took place in New York City in 1969. The details of the event are hazy, but what we can say for certain is that the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, was raided by the police for the stated reason of selling alcohol without a license. The police attempted to arrest many of its patrons for defiance of the New York law requiring at least three articles of “gender-appropriate” clothing. Rather than accepting such egregious treatment, the bar’s patrons—a mix of drag queens, trans people, lesbians, gay men, and all those who blur the lines between these categories—fought back. In doing so, they birthed a new era in the movement for gay liberation. This was also, perhaps, among the most powerful pedagogical events in queer history: the activists who fought back taught the public that they would refuse mistreatment.

A year after taking part in the uprising, iconic trans leader and community organizer Sylvia Rivera participated in another protest. This time, the Gay Liberation Front rose up against Bellevue, a public mental hospital in Manhattan, for its tortuous treatment of queer and trans people. As a child, Rivera had been committed to Bellevue, and was subsequently transferred to another institution for electroshock treatment aimed at eliminating her queerness (Phillips & Olugbala, 2006).

Rivera sought not only to fight against the policing and psychiatric abuse of trans people, but to create alternative systems of genuine support for people who lived outside the pathologizing limits of psycho-medical definition. Together with her friend Marsha P. Johnson, who had also suffered as a patient at Bellevue, Rivera founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). STAR organized a collectively run home for drag queens and trans people living in poverty. Its top floor was envisioned as a school for youth (Gill-Peterson, 2018, p. 24). Rivera was not yet 20, Johnson was only 25. Most residents were even younger. They pooled their resources in order to survive and care for one another: knowledge, housing, food, money.



Figure 1. Sylvia Rivera at Gay Liberation Front’s Demonstration at Bellevue Hospital, 1970. (Wandell, 1970)

Taken together, the actions of Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and other Stonewall rebels serve as powerful pedagogical acts. By breaking through the rigid rules that sought to govern them, Johnson and Rivera dreamed themselves and a different world into being, inspiring a new generation to cultivate their own political imagination and form their own communities of care beyond existing systems of social control. These young activists identified a problem, built from the knowledge and experience of generations that came before them, and collaborated to develop a theory of change coupled with a plan of direct action that continues to teach the public about grassroots organizing.

The educative disruptions led by queer and trans activists have always required extraordinary resistance to the status quo. For more than a century, legal and medical systems have invested in trying to find a way to control gender through the management of trans, intersex, and gender non-conforming people's bodies and ways of being. Much of this effort has been focused on young people.

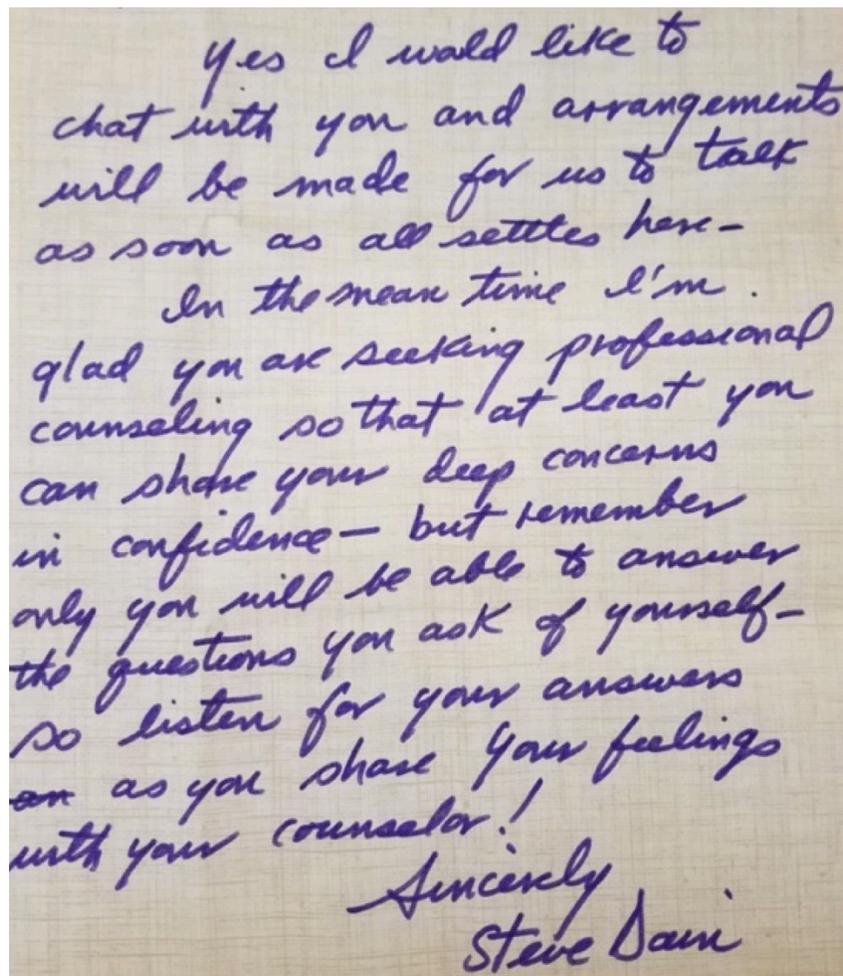
The work of trans historian Jules Gill-Peterson (2018) highlights the field of medicine's interest in normalizing trans and intersex children over the course of the last century, which she argues has always been a racialized project. Gill-Peterson presents evidence from the archives of early 20th-century gender clinics to illustrate how the bodies of White gender non-conforming children were seen as useful sites for experimentation in medical transition because of their potential for assimilation, whereas gender non-conforming children and youth of color were largely funneled toward incarceration and institutionalization. People like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson refused to capitulate to assimilationists, rejecting the idea that they ought to fold themselves into boxes of legibility or appropriateness in order to resist incarceration, let alone to be heard. In turn, many people around them were mad, disgusted, cruel. While Rivera and Johnson are often represented as endlessly resilient, the broader public is rarely invited to consider how painful and infuriating it must have been to live through these conditions. They were unabashedly themselves, aiming not for heroism but for collective self-preservation. Still, even their contemporary representation continues to present a shallow understanding of who they were. *Now they say your folks are telling you to be a superstar/ But I tell you just be satisfied and stay right where you are.*

1979

Although the most well-known trans educators have worked outside of K-12 school classrooms, trans teachers have long struggled to keep their place within them. In fact, this struggle is much older than what is commonly understood. More than 20 years after Christine Jorgensen became the first person in the United States to emerge into a kind of unprecedented fame for having sexual reassignment surgery in 1952, the *New York Times* published a story about a transsexual teacher who was fired in 1971 after transitioning publicly (Hanley, 1978). Prior to her dismissal, Paula Grossman, a White transsexual woman in New Jersey, had been teaching for 31 years. In 1978, after a seven-year legal battle with the state, the appellate court ruled that she was "mentally and physically fit to perform her duties" as a teacher. The court decision stated that "the plain fact is that no school district will employ her because of her transsexual status and the feared effect that she may have on pupils" (Hanley, 1978). The court determined that she was entitled to a disability pension of approximately \$100/month. Incidentally, Grossman was Meryl Streep's music teacher and Streep has publicly described Grossman's case as "animating her conscience" (Brodesser-Ackner, 2019).

In October 1976, the *New York Times* (1976) published a headline that read: "Teacher Who Underwent Sex Change Loses His Job for a Second Time." Steve Dain was a White trans man who had built a career as a

physical education (PE) teacher in Emeryville, California. A tenured, 10-year veteran of the classroom, Dain was awarded Teacher of the Year before his medical transition in 1975, an especially rare honor for a PE teacher, suggesting that he was widely respected by his students and colleagues. What little documentation remains of the case indicates that Dain's transition didn't matter much to students, but the district superintendent was horrified (Bryan, 1976; Stumbo, 1976). He sought to ensure that Dain was not allowed to stay in public education; a key part of his rationale was based in racism. He argued that the Black population of Emeryville "didn't have the sophistication to handle it," that the city was "still just a little industrial community, predominately black, filled with broken families and confused kids" (Stumbo, 1976, p. 126). Although Dain was barred from returning to his position at Emery High after a two-year legal struggle, he did not stop teaching. He went on to become a community college professor and served as a key mentor to more well-known trans icons like Lou Sullivan and Jamison Green.



Yes I would like to
chat with you and arrangements
will be made for us to talk
as soon as all settles here -
In the mean time I'm
glad you are seeking professional
counseling so that at least you
can share your deep concerns
in confidence - but remember
only you will be able to answer
the questions you ask of yourself -
so listen for your answers
as you share your feelings
with your counselor!
Sincerely
Steve Dain

Figure 2. A letter from Steve Dain to Lou Sullivan. (Dain, 1976)

1989

I learned the word "gay" in preschool. The moment is one of my earliest and clearest childhood memories: it was 1989, I was 4 years old, and I had the chicken pox. I couldn't sleep because my skin was terribly itchy, so my parents let me stay up and watch television with them in an effort to distract me

from scratching. As I pulled at the cuffs of my sleeves in a sneaky attempt at indirect relief, the evening news ran a segment on AIDS. Images of men with Kaposi's Sarcoma flashed across the screen. "What's happening to them?" I asked. My mother, who seemed to have forgotten that I was watching, quickly changed the channel. She turned to me and explained, "They're dying. It's very sad." I looked down at the dozens of bright red spots on my arms and suddenly felt terrified. I looked up at her—"Do I ...?"

"Oh, no. Don't worry. It's a grownup disease. You won't get it. It happens to gay men."

I replied, "What's gay?"

"Gay means...that two men love each other." She paused. "Like your uncle. He's gay." I struggled to read her face—nervous, uncomfortable, maybe embarrassed. I don't remember if I said anything, or if the conversation continued beyond that. What I do remember is feeling a palpable shame.

Like so many of my age peers in the United States and around the world, my initial knowledge of gayness came largely through learning about AIDS. As the epidemic unfolded, AIDS and gayness were shadows that moved together in my childhood—perhaps something like what Derrida (1967/2016) might call "traces," an apparition of some distant-but-connected world, present in its ungraspable absence.

Meanwhile, at about the same time as I was making sense of the shadows of AIDS, a group of early childhood educators 250 miles north in New York City began to form a research collaborative to address the topic of sexual orientation and early childhood education. In 1989, Virginia Casper, Jonathan Silin, Harriet Cuffaro, Elaine Wickens, and Stephen Schultz were all working at Bank Street College of Education and their conversation began in the fittingly in-between space of a hallway. The members of this group undertook bold projects: working with teachers of young children to consider the possibility of gay and lesbian students and parents in their classrooms, analyzing how children came to understand the idea of family, organizing within teacher education programs to address gay and lesbian issues in curricula for pre-service teachers, and ultimately, challenging the conceptualization of childhood altogether.

As queer and trans communities around the world fought for survival, the research collaborative worked to build a less homophobic world. They documented their efforts in an article, "Toward a Most Thorough Understanding of the World," published in the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1996. Their work, alongside the efforts of other queer scholars of the time (e.g., Bryson & DeCastell, 1993; Britzman, 1995; Kumashiro, 1999; Luhmann, 1998; Quinlivan & Town, 1999) began to bring knowledge from queer communities to reshape the academic conceptualization of education. Put simply, they worked to build classrooms that were hospitable to queerness. *Keep yourself alive.*

1999

The 1990s saw a flourishing of queer and trans activism. Much of it was built as an alternative to LGBT civil rights efforts that tended to seek ways for gay and lesbian people to "fit in" to society. Queer and trans communities fought, instead, to change (or abolish) the rules of the game through a critique of taken-for-granted ideas about gender and sexuality. Of course, many individuals were somewhere in between. Publications by writers and scholars like Judith Butler (1990), Sandy Stone (1994), Leslie Feinberg (1993/2014; 1998), and Susan Stryker (1994) offered new ideas that shaped the continued movement for trans justice. However, published writing was certainly not the only site of

trans knowledge production and mobilization. Trans communities built power and produced knowledge wherever they could gather: in the street, on the emerging internet, at conferences, at Camp Trans and other protests, in bars and living rooms. While hardly monolithic, community-based education was a central project among trans communities in the 1990s and served as a form of mutual aid enabling greater access to life-sustaining resources and care.

I was too young to participate in most of that, so I found my way in at a bookstore. At 14, I traveled an hour and a half away from my hometown in search of Lambda Rising, the gay bookstore in Washington DC's then-gayborhood, Dupont Circle. I had learned about it through the still-nascent queer internet underground. My cheeks flushed as I tried to make myself as inconspicuous as possible moving through the aisles, likely to the amusement of the store clerks. I stopped in my tracks when I saw a copy of *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg (1993) sitting on the shelf. It seemed like ze was looking right at me, hir handsome face bent in a kind of knowing nod, a gesture of solidarity. I reached up to the shelf with a sweaty palm, thumbed through the pages, hands shaking. I put the book back on the shelf and left. Somehow, that collection of a few hundred pages was too overwhelming.



Figure 3. Cover of *Stone Butch Blues*

Three years later, when I finally returned to the text, Leslie Feinberg became my teacher and the book my curriculum. Feinberg opened the world for me, offering me a kind of freedom I had never conceived of. The book paints a portrait of the expansive possibilities between and beyond the categories of male/female/gay/straight that sometimes hold us captive (Smith & Stanley, 2011). The main character, Jess Goldberg, says, “I don’t want another label [...] I just wish we had words so pretty we’d go out of our way to say them out loud” (Feinberg, 1993/2014, p.278). Although the book addresses the extraordinary violence and danger faced by its characters, it tells a story of beautiful resilience, sending a clear message that the most gratifying form of survival is one that maintains integrity to one’s own knowledge, even when that knowledge seems unthinkable. *Keep yourself alive.*

2009

After finishing college, I became a kindergarten teacher in New York City. To be frank, I had no idea what I was doing. I never planned to become a teacher. I hadn't particularly liked school as a child, nor had I been especially academically successful. Two experiences led me back to the classroom. The first was a series of summers spent working at an arts-based summer camp staffed largely by queer people; the second was my time spent tutoring at a Brooklyn community center called Make the Road by Walking. Both offered a vision of alternative possibilities for ways that adults and children might relate to one another. Each experience embodied a simple idea: *being together is precious and powerful*, and we have much to learn from it. This was different from how I conceptualized school at the time, which was primarily as a place that stifled children's curiosity and restricted their freedom.

I began to reconsider the role of the educator, exploring the possibilities of the classroom as a creative space. It could be a place where, as Maxine Greene (1995) says, people might, "through their coming together constitute a newly human world, one worthy enough and responsive enough to be both durable and open to continual renewal" (p. 59). I was able to believe in that possibility because I had been immersed in queer, trans, and activist communities that were trying to build those worlds.

I was allowed to teach under an emergency credential provided by an alternative certification program, and so I had almost no teacher education until I found my way to Bank Street College. It was a tiny uptown graduate school that focused on early childhood and elementary education. Being there was like going to the preschool of my dreams—as an adult. Alongside coursework in educational foundations and curriculum theory, I took courses in movement, music, block building, and art. I wandered into the depths of progressive social studies-based education. I learned about using the city as a classroom and children's questions as the curriculum. I started to see the local pizza shop and the subway as pedagogical opportunities. I learned how to *let go* and allow my students to direct imaginative play, to gently create strategic, structured conditions for students to follow their own inquiries, and to use their questions to develop the skills necessary to sustain the communities they wanted to preserve or form. It was a far cry from the reading workbooks that I had been told to use.

My education at Bank Street did not explicitly include coursework on "queer pedagogy." Yet I did learn something about what queer pedagogy might look like in practice. The program's curriculum offered a set of tools that were complementary to what I knew of queer theory, and which allowed me to break from dominant forms of pedagogy that overlooked children's complexity in favor of standardizing instruction.

A few years later, I read Jonathan Silin's (1995) landmark book *Sex, Death, and the Education of Children: Our Passion for Ignorance in the Age of AIDS*. In it, I found more analysis of this important shift in pedagogical practice. As Silin describes so beautifully and so wrenchingly in that book and in his overall body of work, the adult management of childhood is a project of social control. It aims to cultivate a future without all the topics that adults would rather avoid—like queerness, like AIDS, like sex, death, racism, violence—just as adults worked to manage my understanding of AIDS.

Throughout his decades-long career in the field of education, Silin has invited educators into a rigorous practice of listening to and learning from children's experience—not only in order to inform our teaching practices, but to recognize that serious consideration of children's knowledge production

could transform how we understand the foundations of the social world. As Casper and Silin and their colleagues (1996) note, working toward a deeper engagement with humanity has been one of the most important contributions of queer scholars in education. *Keep yourself alive*.

2019

My life as an educator has changed over the last 10 years. My questions about the classroom led me, maybe ironically, back to school. I enrolled in a doctoral program focused on curriculum and teacher education, hoping that it would grant me some time and resources to think deeply about how adults teach children about the social world. My doctoral education was not without challenges, but it did indeed offer those things. Now, I am in my first year as a professor, in an inaugural professorship in gender and sexuality research in education.

The work that I can do today is only possible because of the many years of struggle, organizing, and community-making that came before it. I have a responsibility to carry that struggle forward in the ways that my position allows. Building from that legacy, I aim to help cultivate educational environments that are less concerned with cultivating a well-managed child and more interested in generative engagement with children's knowledge, particularly the knowledge embodied by those children who defy the controls imposed upon them (Keenan, 2017). Schools and classrooms are proxies for society—they are one place among many where we learn how to be together, how to build relationships.

We are in desperate need of finding new ways to be together. Envisioning these new ways is easier said than done. In my relatively comfortable position in academia, it is all too easy to make lofty proposals that may seem disconnected from the daily lives of teachers in school settings and whose work is increasingly constrained. When teachers have to justify imaginative play, field trips, or even going to the bathroom, how can they make room in their lives for the complex task of reconceptualizing their pedagogy? Here, I gently suggest that the work has already begun. Queer and trans communities and others who live on the margins of society are building new worlds every day.

In my work, I remember my own teachers. I hold close to the pedagogical legacy of Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and all those queer and trans ancestors at Stonewall whose names I do not know, who refused to accept the legal restrictions enforced on their beauty. I think of Steve Dain and Paula Grossman. I think of the great lengths they and so many others went to in order to keep their full selves alive. They put their foot in the doors that tried to shut them out, and by doing so, they created an opening for you and me. Finding strength in their strength has helped me to keep my fullest self alive as an educator, to teach from what I know. I hope they might do the same for you.

*I was told a million times of all the troubles in my way
Mind you grow a little wiser, little better every day
But if I crossed a million rivers and I rode a million miles
Then I'd still be where I started ...*

In solidarity,

Harper

2021: A POSTSCRIPT

As I write the final version of this article, the entire world is experiencing devastation from the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus has killed more than a reported two million people, 20 percent of them in the United States alone. It seems that every existing social and economic problem has rapidly deepened. The global economy is in shambles. People are hungry and too many are isolated from networks of support. The US is increasingly descending into fascist leadership and vigilante violence by White supremacists. At the same time, we are witnessing a resurgence of uprisings in support of Black life. There has been widespread engagement with mutual aid as neighbors find ways to safely care for each other. Teachers are connecting with students through the many challenges of distance learning.

These days, the phrase *keep yourself alive* takes on new meaning. Our collective survival relies on thinking about our relationships to each other. What can we do together—right now—to act toward more just and caring futures? There has never been a more pressing time to return to careful study of queer/trans histories for insight, to the ways that we care for one another through HIV/AIDS (including Jonathan Silin's urgent call in his 1995 book to respond to children's inquiries and concerns about the virus), to Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson's direct service work with STAR, to all those tiny unrecorded actions—sharing food stamps, calling a friend on the telephone, going with someone to the doctor—that have sustained us. It has never been more clear: we need each other.

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Harper Keenan is an assistant professor of gender & sexuality research in education at the University of British Columbia. Harper’s work examines how adults teach children to make sense of the social world. His primary goals as an academic are to help shape the teaching and learning of young children and their educators and to shift public thinking about children and childhood. Harper believes in pedagogies that engage young students in meaningful and rigorous inquiry driven by social experience. Broadly, Harper’s academic interests include queer/trans pedagogies, anti-racist education, history & social science education, early childhood and elementary education, and teacher education.