

accept a position in a school where the traditions and values are very different from your own?

Who Cares?

Long before entering the classroom at Brantford Secondary School, a large urban high school in a medium-sized Ontario city, Kate Turnell was concerned about how she would be judged as a teacher and as a staff member. After all, she wasn't a traditional Science teacher by any stretch of the imagination. Kate was a lesbian, and she presented herself as a gender-non-conforming individual. She wasn't feminine in appearance; she didn't wear jewellery, dresses, or even make-up. She wore her hair short, combed straight back in a blunt cut, and usually wore men's clothing, preferably suits with a masculine cut. She was androgynous in appearance and was sometimes even taken for a man. Before coming out as a lesbian in university, she had presented herself as gender-conforming and had not stood out in any way. She was drawn to Science as a largely male educational discipline in which society expected few feminine women to be engaged.

Kate realized that she did not fit most social expectations of her gender, and so she anticipated that her legitimacy as a teacher would be questioned by her students and perhaps even her colleagues. She was surprised that her first teaching assignment included an all-male Biology class. She was even more surprised to learn that almost all of her students planned to become caregivers, a career path that Kate had always associated with women. Many of these students were of South Asian and Caribbean descent, and she quickly discovered that they were influenced by very different cultural norms about masculinity than she was. The families of her students came from a long tradition in which both men and women viewed school, and particularly Biology, as gateways to various caregiving professions, such as nursing and physical therapy. From the students' point of view, boys and men could and should be caregivers, and this did not appear to conflict in any way with their own notions of masculinity or their cultural identities. If masculine boys and men could be caregivers, Kate's students seemed to be willing to accept that lesbians (and a woman who dressed more like a man than a woman) could teach them what they needed to learn. As a consequence, she found that she was able to build positive relationships with most of her male students.

To fulfill their provincial service-learning requirement, all of Kate's Biology students had elected to volunteer in health-care facilities. Recognizing an opportunity to engage her students more deeply in their learning, Kate framed her major assignment as an inquiry in which students were expected to investigate biological questions related to patient health. The students enthusiastically developed projects that covered the major concepts of their Biology course and

allowed them to become more aware of the health challenges faced by patients and their caregivers. Kate was gratified to see that the completed assignments demonstrated her students' grasp of the concepts and was moved by the very real compassion her students revealed in their responses. Kate began to recognize how many of her assumptions about males were being driven by her own cultural experiences and how little she had questioned her own beliefs about gender norms. In fact, Kate was surprised to discover that her all-boys Biology class was teaching her to be more comfortable in her own transgender identity.

Kate was careful not to bring up issues of sexual orientation in her classroom (although she guessed that her students suspected she was a lesbian). She didn't wear a wedding ring or tell her students anything about her family. Most heterosexual teachers were quite open about the presence of husbands, wives, and children in their lives. Kate realized that the stories that gender-conforming teachers provided about their lives outside of the school day contributed to their ability to develop learning relationships with their students. Because they had no personal information about her, Kate's students were often curious about her private life. Even though the topic of her sexual orientation was never brought up directly, her students would ask who she lived with and whether or not she had a boyfriend or girlfriend. Her responses to these kinds of questions were courteous but intentionally vague, and throughout, she was conscious of the fact that she was presenting an unusual role model for most of her students.

In spite of the warm relationships she seemed to be developing with her Biology class, Kate was disappointed to learn that homophobia was nevertheless still present in the class: someone had carved "Miss Turnell is a dyke" on one of the desks in the classroom. Not knowing what else to do, she decided to speak to her principal, Evelyn Bowden, about how to handle the situation. Kate asked to meet with Evelyn privately and took the opportunity to come out officially as a lesbian (although she was fairly certain that her principal already knew). Kate hoped that Evelyn would support her and take the opportunity to address the issue of homophobia in the school head on. Evelyn was clearly uncomfortable with the conversation, and though she expressed concern and promptly arranged for the words on the student's desk to be removed, to Kate's disappointment, nothing else happened. No proactive efforts were taken and soon it was as if the hateful incident had never occurred.

Kate got the feeling that Evelyn and most of the staff simply didn't know what to make of her. As a result, many of them tended to keep their distance. Kate found this curious and disheartening because at this point in the year, she had expected more from her colleagues. It seemed as if both staff and students saw her as being ageless and sexless. In fact, she felt that she was often put in the same gender category as the adolescent boys in her classroom rather than the other adult female teachers in the school. As she had predicted, this turned out to be

problematic for forming social and professional relationships with the rest of the staff, particularly her female colleagues.

Although it was still relatively early in the year, Kate was beginning to wonder if she was going to make any lasting friendships at the school. She was going to have to give this some more thought if she wasn't going to remain marginalized at Brantford.

Questions

The Case

Although this case highlights how typical gender expectations are challenged, how might Kate actually be reinforcing gender stereotypes?

History

In what ways have schools changed to accommodate teachers with diverse sexual orientations? In what ways is it business as usual? Explain your response.

Philosophy

Kate is intentionally vague with her students about her sexual orientation. How much about their private lives should teachers share with students? Why do you think so?

Sociology

How do our taken-for-granted and unconscious assumptions about gender influence our educational practices?

Implications for Practice

In what ways do the gender positions of other teachers affect you and your interactions with them?

Flipping Burgers

It was the first week of August, and Elizabeth Chaput, a first-year teacher, had just been hired to teach Grade 6 at Millbrook Community School, an inner-city K-8 school located a short drive from her apartment. Her principal, Dianne Halworth, thoroughly impressed by Elizabeth's portfolio, professionalism, and ability to teach in both English and French, chose Kevin Gartner, one of the school's veteran teachers, to be her mentor. Dianne, who was well aware of the stresses involved in beginning to teach, had helped to develop the school board's mentoring program. She was concerned about the rate of teacher turnover and