

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

the need to retain more new teachers. After all, close to 40 per cent of new teachers chose to leave the board (and often, teaching) within five years!

Kevin had taught many of the same students the previous year, when they were in Grade 5. He had just moved to the intermediate level from the elementary grades, where he had taught for most of his career. As the Grade 7 teacher, he would teach these students again the following year, barring any unforeseeable changes. He felt that he knew these students very well and offered Elizabeth his opinion on them at every possible opportunity.

However, Elizabeth did not always welcome Kevin's opinions, nor did she believe that they were necessarily accurate. Furthermore, she wanted to get to know her students—particularly their interests and strengths—in her own time, without being biased by her mentor's opinions. As school policy dictated, she had examined her students' school records, but she did so with the aim of identifying the need for accommodations.

The first month of the school year was a torrent of activity. Long days and often longer nights were spent planning, writing a journal, reflecting, and grading. By the end of the first week, Elizabeth felt that she needed her own administrative assistant just to deal with the paperwork involved in teaching.

However, as the weeks sped by, her concerns were increasingly directed to the unhealthy attitudes that some of her students had developed towards their grades. It wasn't just that some students were more anxious about the marks they received than about learning, but Elizabeth suspected that some had internalized their low grades and that the effect was paralyzing them. She remembered studying about **learned helplessness** in her teacher education program, and now she was actually witnessing it firsthand.

"Ms Chaput, I can't do math!" exclaimed Muktiar. "I'm just not smart enough. I've always been a C student in math and that's the best I'll ever do."

Unfortunately, this lack of confidence was not limited to just one student, nor was it confined only to mathematics, as Elizabeth would soon discover.

The problem came to a head in early October when the annual school-wide public speaking competition was announced over the intercom. Each student would be expected to write a three-minute oral presentation and present it before his or her classmates. When Elizabeth began to discuss the project with her class, there was a great deal of groaning. The students knew that the best speeches from each class would be presented in front of the school, and a further competition would be held to decide which speeches moved on to the regional, then district-wide event. When students all around the room announced how poorly they had done in the competition last year, Elizabeth realized she would have to do something to counteract what had clearly become a pervasive sense of discouragement.

She discussed her concerns with Dianne, who agreed that her students could meet the provincial oral language requirements in a different way. The next day, Elizabeth proposed that the class collectively write and perform a play together for the school instead of participating in the public speaking competition. The students were thrilled with the idea and decided to adapt "The Three Little Pigs" to address the theme of bullying. Each student took part in writing and performing the play in front of the whole school.

Elizabeth was impressed with her students' efforts and delighted with their enthusiasm. On the basis of that success, she was emboldened to develop a more comprehensive plan to deal with learned helplessness in her classroom. She decided she would respond to students' work with comments only. She would record a grade in her daybook, but her formal reply to students would only be in the form of anecdotal comments about what the students had done well and what they could do to improve. If her students wished to revise and resubmit assignments on the basis of her comments, she promised to re-evaluate them. Dianne approved Elizabeth's approach but emphasized that the young teacher would need to be diligent in recording all grades and grant any parent's request for more information on their child's progress. Over the rest of the term, Elizabeth's workload increased dramatically. At the same time, the students were revising their work and resubmitting it more often. On one occasion, a student submitted the same writing assignment for assessment seven times! Not only did Elizabeth notice that the students took more interest in learning but also that their grades were improving. After several attempts, many assignments that started out as C's could now justifiably be graded as A's. Behind the scenes, Elizabeth ensured that all student progress was marked in her daybook, and student portfolios were kept in a filing cabinet that the students managed themselves.

At the end of term, Kevin offered to help Elizabeth enter her grades with the district-mandated report card software. Over lunchtime, they sat in Elizabeth's classroom, with Kevin at the computer and Elizabeth perched on a stool beside him. He suggested that he would call out the student's name and subject, and she would call out the grade.

"Michelle Lacerte: Language Arts, Writing," said Kevin.

"A," Elizabeth replied.

Kevin winced, shrugged, and began again, "Language Arts, Oral."

"A," Elizabeth replied.

As the pattern emerged, Kevin became so agitated that he couldn't even bring himself to enter any more of the students' grades. Instead, he turned to Elizabeth and asked her to look more closely at the summary sheets that she had prepared.

"These are not A students, Elizabeth," he said as patiently as he could. "I know you want these kids to feel good about themselves, but let's face it, they are going to be flipping burgers for a living and they will have to face reality sooner or later."

Honestly, I think I know more about these students than you do. After all, I have been teaching a lot longer than you have, and I know which students are going to succeed academically and which will not."

He was about to continue, but Elizabeth cut him off. She explained that she had spoken with Dianne and had records of the students' work to justify the grades that they had achieved.

Kevin stood up quickly. Unable to contain his anger any longer, he exploded, "These students will have a rude awakening next year, and every year after that. And when their parents come complaining to me next year about their kids' grades being so low, I'm going to send them right back to you."

"Please do," Elizabeth replied, as coolly as she could. "I'll make sure they know how well their kids can do when they are given half a chance."

Kevin fumed as he left the classroom, "Boy, are you naive! Unless you wake up and realize where these kids come from, you'll be another one with a rude awakening!"

Questions

The Case

How does Elizabeth address learned helplessness in her classroom, and what are the positive and negative implications of her approach?

History

Historically, teachers assumed that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds would always outperform students who were more disadvantaged. From your own experience, what evidence do you see that teachers are still making these kinds of assumptions?

Philosophy

What are the virtues of a good mentor?

Sociology

This case illustrates ways in which mentoring programs can fail to achieve the desired outcomes of supporting new teachers. How do you think age, experience, status, and other sociological factors affect this professional relationship?

Implications for Practice

In your practice, you are likely to encounter students who have internalized low expectations. How will you recognize these kinds of students in your own class, and what will you do to help them?