



I Kept Quiet, and Lost My Job Anyway

By teaching my students about prejudice without coming out, I missed the biggest opportunity of all

By Nick Divito

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March 7 issue - "Anyone who talks is a faggot." That was what my eighth-grade students said to quiet their peers so they could go home. They knew that I, their Literacy Plus teacher, wouldn't allow them to leave for the day until the room was tidied and their mouths were shut. My threatening them with detention did nothing. Neither did phone calls to parents. They scoffed at getting an "unsatisfactory" rating in citizenship, and they knew the channels for suspension were long and drawn out. Yet somehow, the danger of being labeled a homosexual by their friends was enough to scare them straight, and the room would fall silent whenever anyone belted out the warning.

Welcome to my world as a public-school teacher in a rough section of Brooklyn, where students bandied about the word "fag" as often as they forgot to do their homework. Here, male students guarded their reputations closer than their mothers' honor. I knew attitudes about homosexuality in an inner-city neighborhood would be less than ideal. But I was blinded by the rose-colored glasses I donned in an effort to save the world. Cue the laugh track.

I was called "faggot" several times by various students, and they'd mimic me in a sing-songy voice, heavy on the lisp. (Even though I don't have a lisp.) One student even asked: "Mister? Are you a faggot?" Though shocked, I quickly turned on my best teacher voice and advised her that the F word was unbecoming. The student smiled, then shouted in the middle of the classroom, "Mr. Divito's a faggot!"

Believe it or not, I had volunteered for this. I was a proud member of the New York City Teaching Fellowship, a program that infuses the city's troubled educational system with career professionals. I had left my safe world as a journalist and gone into teaching, hoping to show these kids their fates weren't sealed because of their skin color or the size of their bank accounts.

Before I started teaching, I debated about whether I should come out to my students. My partner insisted I should, that it was my obligation to teach things headier than sentence structure. I contended that my job was not to get them to like gay people. It was to get them to like writing.

My decision not to come out to my students was ultimately based on the advice of the more-seasoned teachers and the school's principal, all of whom counseled me to check my belief system at the door. In short, I was conditioned to fear losing my job for "promoting gayness."

I had bigger fish to fry anyway. Most of my students performed below grade level, and their apathy toward schoolwork only compounded the problem. I had to do my best to reverse that tide, despite their resistance. It often felt like hugging a porcupine, nudging them toward success while getting pricked along the way.

I often fantasized about chipping away at their homophobia a little at a time. Like a true drama queen, I would have a big revelation at the end of the year: "You know sentence structure! You've got subject-verb agreement down pat! Oh, and now you know I'm gay!" Banners, streamers, the works. I figured once I had their respect, they'd realize someone they knew was hurt by their prejudice.

But I never got the chance to teach that lesson. Ironically, a different kind of hate speech forced my resignation: the dreaded N word. During one of my lessons on tolerance and understanding, I read Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. I watched as the quiet students spoke out, the outspoken ones listened. Then the conversation shifted to their use of the word "nigger," a name they often called each other.

I challenged them to consider that the word stems from slavery and that using it tacitly cements stereotypes that work against them. I doled out the homework: an essay on the topic "Are We Really Free and Equal?" and got some of the best pieces of writing I had ever received. An average day saw me collecting 20 homework assignments from 150 students; this one yielded 130.

The next day about eight parents complained to the principal, wanting to know why a white teacher had used the N word in class. I was admonished that I shouldn't have used language that was detrimental to a child's development. In the end, I was so fed up with the whole process that I resigned, wondering what would've happened if I had discussed my sexuality.

What if? Would it have stopped those 11 states from passing laws that ban people like me from getting married? Would it have given the world a greater understanding of acceptance? Doubtful, but I still wish that I had lost my job challenging my students' use of the F word as well as the N word. If I couldn't teach them tolerance, maybe I could have shown them how to be true to themselves.

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