

“Not in My School”

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Not in My School

John Sweet slowly closed Principal Harvey's door behind himself and tried to piece together what had just transpired in the principal's office. "What the hell just happened?" John thought. Thirty minutes earlier, he was called to his principal's office to discuss an email Principal Harvey had received from Ms. Vasquez, the president of the Parent-Teacher Association and the mother of Jose, one of John's third graders. John wasn't concerned, rather excited because during class today, Jose had never been so engaged in a lesson. John's excitement faded quickly once he saw the look on his principal's face.

As he walked back down the hall toward his third grade classroom, John's teeth began to clench with the thought that all the hard work his team had put into creating this new curriculum was for nothing. John slumped down into his desk chair, put his head on his desk, and tried to put together a rational thought. As hard as he tried, all he could do was recall his principal's words:

John, there is absolutely no way I will ever allow this to be taught to third graders in my school. Homosexuality is not something that is talked about in middle schools let alone in third grade! I realize I have given you a lot of freedom in planning and implementing curriculum, but this will never be taught in my school. Not in my school! The entire parent community is going to be up in arms with your teaching about gays. I've got to do something. I need to think about this tonight. Be in my office at 7:30 tomorrow morning.

John picked his head off his desk and his eyes caught a glimpse of the book that had created one of the most powerful lessons in his career, *And Tango Makes Three*. John's eyes then fixed on the clock. It was well past seven o'clock, and everyone in the building had gone home. He locked his classroom door and began to walk toward the parking lot. The only light that remained was coming from the one lit hallway light. He felt alone. He felt helpless. The only thought that ran through his mind was, "How on earth are we going to create a tolerant society if we continue to pretend that gay people are not a part of it?"

Big Otter School

Located in a large mid-Atlantic city, the Big Otter School served a diverse population of over 800 students. Due to an increase in immigrants to the area, the population of the school had changed dramatically over the previous ten years. Ten years earlier, the majority of students were African Americans. However, ten years later, 63% were Hispanic, 30% were African American, 5% were Asian, and 2% were White. Even though there was a shift in the population of the school, the Big Otter School adjusted to this change in culture. Consistently scoring in the top 2% of all schools within this large urban district on standardized tests earned the Big Otter School many awards. They highly valued collaboration with parents and the community. The Parent-Teacher League worked closely with teachers, administrators, and support staff to maximize the learning of all its students. With parental support, community involvement, and teacher collaboration, the Big Otter School was seen as a model for other urban schools in the area.

John Sweet

After graduating from University College, John Sweet joined Teach For America and spent two years teaching middle school history in Houston, Texas. He loved his experience in Houston, but realized during his second year that he needed to go back to school in order to become a better teacher. He chose to pursue a Master's degree in Teacher Leadership from Charles University. After graduating with his Ed.M., he was offered a job teaching third grade at Big Otter School. He was excited because he loved teaching elementary-aged children and knew that having a male teacher was important for younger kids. John quickly established himself as a dedicated and passionate teacher. He often stayed late, tutored children before and after school, and established strong relationships with his colleagues and the families of his students. No one questioned his dedication and it seemed that everyone respected him. This respect was evident when they unanimously voted him to head the Instructional Leadership Team, which oversaw the learning and teaching in the building. Principal Harvey was the first one to congratulate John. They worked well together and for the three years prior to today, Principal Harvey had given John a great deal of autonomy in implementing new curricula.

Moving from Italy to the United States when he was three, John witnessed how hard both his parents worked. They often spoke about how they wanted to make his life better than they had experienced growing up in post-WWII Italy. John knew that he needed to continue the legacy his parents had instilled in him to make the lives of others better. It was during the summer before his fifth year at the Big Otter School that he realized how much influence he could have bringing about great equity in this society.

While attending a Professional Development workshop in Boston, John listened to Kevin Jennings who was the president of the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network (GLSEN); one audience member asked what the gay community needed most. He stated, “We need straight white men to stand up for our rights.” It was at this moment John realized that he had the power to effect great change upon his students. As a straight white man, John knew he needed to go back to his school and become an advocate for all.

Principal Frank Harvey

Frank Harvey came to the Big Otter School two years after John arrived. For ten years prior to coming to the Big Otter, he was principal at a school in a nearby suburb. During college Frank initially was on track to become a priest, but then decided that his true calling was in schools. He established a reputation for building strong relationships with the families in the community, and he often stated, “Strong communication with families is the gateway to student success.” Due to his belief in close family relationships, he created an open-door policy, and many parents brought concerns to his attention.

Frank also believed in his teachers. He established Professional Learning Communities and the Instructional Leadership Team in order to improve the overall instruction of the teachers in the building. Each grade level had common planning times during which time their focus was on instruction. Principal Harvey was also open about his lack of knowledge about curriculum and gave his teachers a great deal of autonomy to develop units that met the state standards. As a result of his leadership, most teachers at the Big Otter School were happy. However, there were a few who felt that he listened too much to the parents and didn’t support his teachers enough.

Mrs. Maria Vasquez and Jose Vasquez

Coming to America from Guatemala when she was thirteen, Mrs. Vasquez shared a similar belief with John's parents of making her son's life better than hers. A devout Catholic, Mrs. Vasquez was an active parent who was the president of the Parent-Teacher League. From helping out in the library to filling in for a sick receptionist, she was constantly at school helping out in any way possible. She had four children at the Big Otter School and believed that they should be afforded every opportunity that the school had to offer. She and John had established a strong relationship, and he had never had any problems with her in the past.

Jose Vasquez was nine years old and was the youngest of the four children. He embodied every characteristic of a youngest son. He was a bright child, but he was constantly getting into trouble for bullying and disrupting class. Jose was the most difficult student for John, and John often had to speak with Mrs. Vasquez about Jose. Although she was always willing to listen, she repeatedly said that she never saw any of the types of behavior observed by John at school. It seemed to John that she did not believe him.

The Third Grade

The third grade at the Big Otter School consisted of ninety students and four teachers each of whom had been at the school for at least three years. Although no title was given, John Sweet was the team leader. During their common planning times, the four teachers worked collaboratively and were constantly working toward improving teaching and learning. One concern seemed to come up every year, but was never

properly addressed. Although outwardly, the Big Otter School was revered throughout the city for its warm community, within its walls were undertones of racist and homophobic sentiments. It seemed to the team that it was during the third grade year when students began to express these thoughts. It had come to a point when the team felt they needed to be addressed. Prior to the start of the school year, the team met to discuss how to address this issue. The team was confident that they could address the racial slurs with greater ease than the homosexual comments. John asked the team, “If we are able to easily discuss racist comments, why can’t we do the same for homophobic ones? We’re going to use picture books to discuss race and racism, so let’s do the same for homosexuality. We won’t call it homosexuality, but we’ll use the term ‘gay’. Parents can’t get mad then. It’s all about tolerance.” The team agreed and felt strongly that they would be able to incorporate picture and trade books that addressed issues of race and homosexuality into their current curriculum. For several weeks before the start of school, the teachers researched and read many books on diversity. The day before the first day of school, Sarah Fletcher—one of the third grade teachers—said, “I think this is going to be a great year. This is exactly what we need.”

And Tango Makes Three

Two months into school the third grade had made wonderful progress discussing race and racism through literature. John felt his class was ready to begin discussing homosexuality. A week earlier, Jose had been caught calling his classmate “gay.” John knew it was time. At their weekly grade level planning session, John told the other third grade teachers that he wanted to read one of the books to his class that they had researched over the summer. Sarah Fletcher agreed that the timing was right by saying,

“Yesterday at recess Jedrys and Juan were telling Marcos that he is gay. I was so frustrated and told them how disrespectful that kind of language is, and they apologized, but I know they still don’t get *why* it’s so offensive.” John agreed, and suggested that they start the unit with the book, *And Tango Makes Three*, by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson. They all agreed that the book was a good choice to begin the dialogue with students, as the message about embracing different kinds of families was clear, yet it was told through a child-friendly true story about penguins at the Central Park Zoo.

The Preparation

Interactive read aloud was an important part of John’s and the other third grade teachers’ literacy instruction. John had thoughtfully planned a lesson for *And Tango Makes Three*, with the stated objective, “Students will be able to explain that some people have different kinds of families (including gay parents) that love them.” John discussed the objective with his grade level team, and they all agreed that it was a good idea to keep the focus on what the word “gay” means and how gay parents love their children in the same way that heterosexual parents do. John knew that after reading the book, it would be important to explicitly discuss the word “gay” with his students. While John felt slight anxiety at the prospect of openly discussing an issue that might be uncomfortable for students, he thought, “The only way for students to understand why it’s wrong to use the word ‘gay’ as an insult is to take the power out of it by talking about what it really means.”

The Lesson

John started the lesson by introducing the book and doing a book walk (looking at only the pictures and thinking about what might be happening in the story). His students showed great interest in the book right away. They all loved books with animals, and they were captivated by the illustrations. John asked the students to think about the pictures and turn and talk with their partners about their predictions for the story. Most of the students were able to accurately predict that the story was about two penguins that had a baby that they loved very much. One student, Jennifer, said to her partner, “I think a mom penguin and a dad penguin are really proud of their cute new baby penguin. They like to take care of the baby and then they all live happily ever after. In the zoo.”

John began reading the book to his students. All students’ eyes were intently focused on the pictures in the book as John read aloud in a confident, storyteller’s voice. When he read the line “Families of all kinds visit the zoo”, John paused and asked the students to think about what they knew about different kinds of families. Students eagerly raised their hands to share examples of their own families, such as those with single parents, grandparents, and foster parents. John asked the students what they thought was the most important thing for parents to do for their children. Jose raised his arm up high, and when John called on him, Jose said, “Your family needs to take care of you and protect you. They need to love you.” John was glad that Jose made this point, and he thought about how committed Jose’s mother was. “That’s right, Jose. Even though there are different kinds of parents and families, the most important thing is that they love you,” replied John.

John continued with the rest of the book. The students showed great interest in the story, laughing out loud as the two penguins, Roy and Silo, tried to hatch an egg from

a rock. None of the students questioned the idea of two male penguins trying to hatch an egg together to have a baby penguin. They all cheered when Roy and Silo were given a real egg to hatch, and when their baby, Tango, was born, they let out a collective “Awww!” John was pleased with the level of engagement in the story, though he guessed that the students were not aware of the implication that Roy and Silo were a couple.

After the story was finished, John told his students, “I want you to think about the relationship between Roy and Silo. Turn and talk to your partner about what you noticed about how they treated each other.” The students eagerly began talking about the two penguins. John listened in on their conversations and heard students say things like, “Roy and Silo loved each other”, “They took care of each other”, “They played together and had fun”, and “They wanted a baby penguin”. John asked the students if Roy and Silo were different from other parents. Jose shot his hand up and said, “They’re both boys! They’re not supposed to have a baby together, because in real life a mom and a dad have a baby, not two dads!” John knew that this was the turning point in the discussion to focus on how Roy and Silo represented a different kind of family, one with same sex parents. John explained to the class that, just like Roy and Silo, some men love other men, and some women love other women. “But that’s GAY!” one of the students, Ronald, immediately shouted out in disgust. John noticed that while some of the students made faces upon hearing the word “gay”, they were all listening intently to hear what he would say in response. John replied,

You’re right, Ronald. The word gay describes people that fall in love with people of the same gender. So that means that two men can fall in love or it can mean

two women can fall in love. Just like Roy and Silo. Sometimes gay people have children, too! And gay parents who have children love their children just like any other mom or dad does.

John knew that this was probably a new, and possibly confusing, concept for many of the students, so he gave them time to think about what he had said. He then asked if they were any questions. Jose raised his hand and said, “But my mom says that it’s wrong and that gay people are nasty.” John paused, realizing the delicacy of the situation, and the need to choose his words carefully. He said

Some people do think that. But just think about Roy and Silo. They love each other very much, and they are great parents to Tango. So even though some people are not used to gay people, it’s like how we learned how to respect people of all races. It’s the same kind of thing. Just because people have something that makes them different from other people doesn’t mean that we should treat them differently.

John then explained to his students how, when they used the word “gay” to make fun of each other, that it was insulting to people who are actually gay. John wanted to give more opportunities for students to talk about this new information, so he asked students to turn and talk with their partners about the questions he wrote on the board: “How do you think Roy and Silo would feel if other penguins made fun of them by calling them gay? Why is it important to treat gay people equally?” John circulated throughout the classroom, listening to students’ conversations. He heard comments like “Roy and Silo would have been very sad if other penguins were mean and called them gay” and “We

should be nice to gay people too, because they're just like other people and it's not nice to call people names." However, John was most surprised and pleased when he heard Jose say, "I need to make sure not to say that any of my friends are gay. I wouldn't want anyone to do that to Roy and Silo. I should tell my family, too, so they can learn that it's not nice to make fun of gay people." John felt overwhelming pride in Jose's words, and was impressed that he was thinking about ways to teach his parents something he had learned. John *knew* at that moment that he had successfully taught a profoundly important lesson to his students, and he couldn't wait to share how well it went with his grade level team.

The Email

John was still in his classroom at 5:00 that afternoon. He had spent over an hour recounting the lesson with his colleagues, and telling them how good he felt about what the students were saying. He was putting the finishing touches on his plans for the next day's extension lesson when Frank Harvey walked in and said, "John, can you come into my office? We need to talk." John agreed, but something about Frank's tone of voice set off a warning signal in his mind. He had enjoyed having a good relationship with his principal, but it was unusual for Frank to ask him to come to his office, especially when he was already in the classroom. John thought for a moment that the request might be related to the day's lesson, but he quickly dismissed the idea, since it had gone so well.

John closed the door behind him as he walked into Frank's office, sat down on one of the chairs facing his desk and asked, "What's up, Frank?" Frank replied "What's up, John, is this email I got from Jose's mother about half an hour ago. I want you to read it right

now!” John felt a growing sense of unease as he looked at Frank’s computer and read a scathing email about how irresponsible it was for John to be teaching Jose about the gay lifestyle, that he was promoting a lifestyle that her religion did not support, and that she was extremely disappointed in the school for allowing such “garbage” to be taught to young students. The part that disturbed John the most read

And all this from a teacher who keeps telling me my son doesn’t know how to behave! I don’t know what Mr. Sweet’s sexual preference is, but he has no business teaching my son or anyone else about being gay. I will be coming in after school tomorrow to talk with you about this, and if I find out that Mr. Sweet plans on teaching any more of this gay nonsense, I will be sure to get the other parents involved. I know this community, and I know they don’t want their kids learning how to be gay in third grade!

John’s stomach dropped as he read the rest of the email, and when he finished, he looked at Frank, speechless. He couldn’t believe the hateful words that Ms. Vasquez had written, and he was sure that Frank was in just as much shock. John said,

Frank, can you believe this? This is ridiculous! You know we’ve been having problems with our students making homophobic comments, so I taught a lesson today about what the word “gay” means and how we need to show respect to all kinds of people. I just read my class a picture book about two penguins raising a baby! I didn’t tell them HOW to be gay! Who does she think she is?

John’s anger was palpable. He could see that Frank’s face was getting red. Frank let loose on a diatribe, dismissing John’s entire lesson as being inappropriate for third

graders, and telling John that if he wanted to address the homophobic comments that students had been making, then he should have discussed it with him first. John couldn't believe what he was hearing. Frank knew about and was supportive of the unit he had taught about anti-racism, so he couldn't comprehend Frank's intolerance of what he thought was a very similar issue. John had always appreciated how Frank was collaborative and supported teacher leadership, so he bristled when Frank shouted, "This will not be taught in my school. Not in my school!" John wondered why Frank was suddenly referring to Big Otter as *his* school, when in the past he had always made sure to establish a community in which everyone felt ownership of the school. It wasn't just Frank's school, and John felt adamant that he and the other teachers knew best what their students needed. John was still furious when he agreed to meet Frank the next morning at 7:30 to continue the discussion. He just couldn't believe that such an important lesson had been tarnished by a bigoted parent and a principal whom he had thought was on his side.

The Drive Home

As soon as John left school that night, he got in his car and immediately speed-dialed Sarah Fletcher. "You wouldn't believe what just happened!" John said as soon as she picked up. He recounted the contents of Mrs. Vasquez's email, as well as the discussion he had with Frank. The more he told Sarah, the angrier they both became. "I just can't believe that when we're trying to teach their kids to be tolerant people, we get accused of being anti-religion or that we're teaching kids to be gay!" exclaimed Sarah. They continued the discussion well after John arrived at home and pulled into his driveway. He turned off the car lights and said, "I don't know if I can continue to teach

at a school with a principal who is this unsupportive of something that's so important to us. I don't know what his plan is or what he'll say to me tomorrow, but I've got to figure out what I'm going to do." The next morning, more confident than ever, John walked into Frank's office and closed the door.