

Gay, lesbian teachers reluctantly live a lie: Want to come out but worry about safety, jobs
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Byline: *Jodie* *Sinnema*
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EDMONTON - They all want to come out of the teaching closet.

The 57-year-old retired principal who worries about the impact it would have on his family.

The 33-year-old student teacher, about to step back into the closet in his search for a job in an elementary school.

The 41-year-old science teacher, scared for her safety after someone complained to the school board about her.

Welcome to the world of gay, lesbian and bisexual teachers, a world often filled with anxiety, fear and silence despite a powerful desire to be open role models for young people.

For years, sexual orientation has been a hot-button issue in Alberta.

In 1998, seven years after Delwin Vriend was dismissed from his teaching job at the Christian-based King's University College, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that sexual orientation should be included in Alberta's human rights legislation.

The Alberta Teachers' Association followed suit with some pioneering measures to protect individuals.

First the ATA protected lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in 1999; then it added protection for teachers in 2000.

In 2003, the ATA also became the first teachers association in Canada to give protection against discrimination for students based on gender identity -- kids whose concept of themselves as male or female may differ from their physical bodies.

Gay-straight support groups have sprouted up among students at Harry Ainlay and Ross Sheppard high schools in the past year. Sixteen public school teachers were trained last year and are preparing to hold school workshops on how to make classrooms welcoming to gay and lesbian students.

But openness among teachers is hard to find.

Despite the paper protections, gay and lesbian teachers worry about losing their jobs, about having parents pull children from their classes and about being associated with sexual predators.

"It's getting to the point where I can't be silent anymore," said Janine, 48, a high school teacher who has been in the classroom since 1980, but has never openly talked about her sexual orientation to colleagues, even though she believes her current staff would largely be supportive. Her name and the others in this article have been changed.

"If anybody asked me, I'd say 'Yeah,' but nobody ever does," she said. "It's unfortunate because sometimes, there are joyful things I can't share at work," like meeting new girlfriends or attending gay-friendly functions.

Although the Edmonton Public board has included sexual orientation in its policy on discrimination and harassment between staff members -- Edmonton Catholic doesn't refer to sexual orientation in its policies -- most gay teachers say safety depends on individual school principals.

"There are ways to get rid of people and I don't want to be a sacrificial lamb," Janine said.

Bob Gagnon, a consultant with Edmonton Catholic's religious education services, said he hopes gay and lesbian teachers feel welcome and safe in Catholic schools.

"We treat all members of our learning community with dignity and respect and that would include our gay and lesbian students and teachers," Gagnon said.

However, he said it wouldn't be appropriate for teachers to use their job to promote their personal agenda, though he said it's sometimes difficult to differentiate between promoting a personal agenda and simply living out personal convictions.

For Vince, a 33-year-old education student about to graduate, being open about his sexual orientation isn't about promoting the gay way of life to students; it's about being true to himself and being a positive role model.

He has been openly gay for almost 10 years, but fears that his openness in university has compromised his wish to be an elementary school teacher.

"Getting a job is more important than being an advocate right now," Vince said. "There is no way I would out myself before I get a permanent contract. ..."

"I'm going to have to withhold information," Vince said, sitting in a downtown coffee shop. "It's like you're going back to high school and having to hide. It's a big drain. It's terrible and I don't think straight people can understand."

He already dreads the toll it will take on his relationship: pretending his boyfriend doesn't exist. For the most part, Vince said, it's not the students he worries about.

"Kids are a little more fresh, a little less biased. They take joy in little things and I think they're more open and accepting," he said. "Parents are the ones who cause the most problems in elementary."

As an elementary teacher, Vince said some people might automatically label him a pedophile, while high school teachers are often presumed to be recruiting young males to the gay lifestyle.

It's not that he thinks elementary-age children are all ready or able to understand his sexual orientation. He simply wants to teach them tolerance of different family units and to rethink gender stereotypes.

"It's a sense of giving back to the community in spite of what my experience was," Vince said, remembering death threats and harassing phone calls to his home, and taunts and bullying in junior high.

Andre Grace, a professor in educational policy studies at the University of Alberta, said he counsels new teachers not to come out when they first get jobs.

"They need to put personal safety and professional security first," said Grace, who is currently doing a three-year study of about 30 gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual teachers across Canada.

He doesn't know how many gay or lesbian teachers there are in the system. It's believed about one in 10 people in the general population is gay, but an estimated six in 10

people know someone who is gay, has a gay family member or gay friend.

But Grace said only a minuscule number of teachers, mostly males under 30, are out in Alberta classrooms -- and only after carefully strategizing with principals and many one-on-one talks with parents.

"In most (of my) interviews (with gay teachers), there is a pervasive sadness," Grace said.

Few apply for family benefits for their partners. Many have taken stress or illness leaves from their schools, exhausted from hiding, ashamed that they can't be role models to students.

Kris Wells, 32, simply left the profession and went back to university because he was disillusioned.

"I couldn't be an authentic teacher," said Wells, noting that the profession is losing talented young teachers because fewer are now willing to completely sacrifice their identity to the profession.

"Every teacher has a professional, legal and ethical responsibility to ensure that their classrooms are inclusive and respectful of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered) students and teachers," said Wells, who developed the ATA workshops. "That's the bottom

line, regardless of their political, moral and religious beliefs."

Grace said the Alberta Teachers' Association is leading the country with its code of conduct. But he said Alberta Learning has to develop its own policies of inclusion.

Bart Johnson, spokesman for Alberta Learning, said such a policy would be redundant, since Alberta human rights legislation already protects gay and lesbian people from unfair dismissal.

Even in B.C. -- where the human rights code included sexual orientation six years before Alberta -- the learning department is silent on the issue, said Steve LeBel, spokesman for the Gay and Lesbian Educators of B.C.

Neither the B.C. nor the Alberta

curriculums refer specifically to sexual orientation issues in lessons, but there is room for teachers to start discussions on the topic. Teachers can choose to bring up the issue when talking about tolerance and diversity in health or CALM (career and life management) classes. Gay marriage and changes to the constitution can be addressed in social studies lessons about current events.

But by being silent, LeBel said, the government downloads the responsibility of dealing with the sensitive, controversial topic on to boards and leaves teachers to take the heat if they decide to address sexual orientation in the class and in the staff room.

Kathy, a 41-year-old Edmontonian who teaches high school science to students over 18, has rarely felt that heat.

"I am as open as you can get in a high school situation," said Kathy, who has been out professionally for seven years, despite being personally out since she was 14.

"I mean, I don't advertise it, that's for sure. I have never brought it up in class, ever, unless a student brings it up to me first, but my principal is totally aware and I'm completely out with the staff."

When her 10-year relationship fell apart, she received as much support as a heterosexual teacher who was going through a divorce.

"I have a totally secure foundation as a good educator who gets good results and keeps kids in class. If you kind of have that reputation, you're probably more likely to come out."

She can't use her name right now, though she would like to. After someone complained to the school board about her being a lesbian teacher, her principal started screening her calls to ensure her safety. The public school board threw out the complaint.

Kathy displays a gay pride flag in her classroom. In her biology class, she always talks about "partners" rather than "husbands and wives."

But she said a gay teacher does not make a gay classroom.

"We are seen as playing very critical roles in the lives of very vulnerable people," she said. "Therefore, our mentoring is important and society as a whole thinks mentoring a healthy homosexual lifestyle is not a good thing.

"Ultimately, that puts pressure on teachers not to be out when, in essence, gay kids need to know that there are totally healthy gay people in this world besides Will and Grace or Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.

"We need to be more out because if we are more out, it becomes more normalized and less of an issue," she said. "I mean, who cares?"

jsinnema@thejournal.canwest.com

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Illustration: Photo: The Canadian Press / Delwin Vriend, a gay man who was fired from his job at an Alberta College smiles at a news conference in Edmonton on April 2, 1998, after the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the government of Alberta must recognize sexual orientation under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

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