

Aurora classroom tackles tough questions and combats homophobia in new pilot project



By Brock Weir

Whether you have grown up with two moms, two dads, identify yourself as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer, you deserve a space free of bullying and brimming with positive reinforcement.

That is the philosophy of a group of Grade 5 and Grade 6 students at Devins Drive Public School, who have put their firm belief in tolerance and acceptance for all into action by turning their classroom into a 'Positive Space' environment.

It's a place which can provide a safe haven, free of bullying for LGBTQ students and their families, free of racism and prejudice, and an environment where everyone can feel equal and comfortable within themselves.

Students in the class have spent the last few weeks proudly donning pink shirts, clothes, and even bandanas to raise awareness of the International Day of Pink, an anti-bullying initiative founded just a few short years ago by Nova Scotia students to replace bullying with tolerance and acceptance.

Rather than just acting as walking billboards for the cause, they have taken things a step further, putting their heads together on a common philosophy they have taken to each and every classroom and, this week, brought it to a wider audience through morning announcements and a banner in the school foyer to create a dialogue on LGBTQ issues.

'One of our responsibilities is to educate the kids at the school about The Day of Pink and teach them that bullying someone because they are gay is not right and we should try to put an end to it so no one feels left out,' says student Haley Hastings.

Adds Noah Ruscica: 'We want to send a message that no matter what you look like, how you act and who you like, you have no right to bully people about that.'

The students are in agreement that it is important not to ignore people's differences; rather, these differences should be celebrated.

As they went from classroom to classroom, the students found they had a little bit more to explain to younger kids that there is nothing fundamentally different about having two moms or two dads, says Regan Uccial, who noted they found wearing pink really helped bring out questions from the younger grades.

'I think the main thing is people don't understand the words that pop out of their mouth,' says Elizabeth Martynova. 'When someone comes out saying, 'That's so gay!' that is not right. How is someone being gay relate to something that is not nice. Do people go around saying, 'That's so straight!?' What's the difference, really?'

In talking to the class, the general consensus is it's time to truly educate people about these differences. People don't understand what they are and this misconception or sense of the unknown can make people afraid, they say.

'They are afraid that, 'If I see a person being bullied, and if I go and help them, what is going to happen to me?' Well, it is all going to get better and we tried to answer that question,' says Haley.

Adds Noah: 'When people say, 'That's so gay', before these presentations, I don't think people actually knew how much damage they could do by actually saying that.' If someone who had two moms or two dads heard that, that could really hurt them.'

As the students extended their own education campaign this week, watching on with pride was teacher Mark Tweyman. Mr. Tweyman really got the ball rolling with his students in the fall when, after a Spirit Day combatting homophobic bullying held by the York Region District School Board, he decided to talk to his class about it.

What he expected to be a 10 or 15 minute conversation with the students eventually turned into an hour-long dialogue.

'They kids were engaged, they had questions and they kept going with it,' he says.

From there, they took on projects relating to gay issues and the more they learned, the more questions they had. Eventually one of the students suggested they put the triangle on their door as a sign their classroom was a 'Positive Space.'

The move was not without controversy, he says. Some in administration wanted the sign removed once everyone knew what it meant, but the students were having none of that.

'I was [called] into a meeting and had a bit of heads up,' says Mr. Tweyman. 'I told the students, 'this is what I am going in for. What do you think?' They were adamant, saying 'We will not take down our sign. We put it up, we like it up, we believe what it says and we are keeping our sign ' so you go and fight for us.' So, I sat in front of the principal and the administrator from our board and said, 'We will not take down our sign.'

During the meeting, the administration's approach shifted gears, he said, and they proposed turning their classroom into a pilot project for other schools, spearheading a new approach to understanding which could become the norm throughout the York Region District School Board about the kinds of conversations teachers can have with their students, how they can be approached, and how programs can be developed to lead to a greater understanding not just within the individual school but across the board.

Leading up to Wednesday's Day of Pink, the students broke off into subcommittees, some planning morning announcements, others spearheading education initiatives, and others developing a banner, which is now inside the door, and will remain up on the wall to educate visitors coming into the school.

'I have been incredibly happy with parents' reactions to the program because in order to become one of the pilot schools, we have to bring it to our school council,' Mr. Tweyman explains. 'When we did, they loved it. We have at least one LGBTQ family in our school and everyone is aware of that.'

'We realise as a community, as a school, as a board we do a lot for gender equality and race equality, but we haven't really pushed sexual orientation or sexual diversity. The parents were all on board, so let's talk about it!'