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Impact at the Grassroots: Challenges and Rewards in Teaching LGBTQ+ History

Surviving the Darkness: Challenges to Teaching LGBTQ+ History

Teaching sensitive, potentially controversial material, regardless of teacher motivation or community open-mindedness, is not without its challenges. Resistance to change in education is historically well documented¹ and, in many cases, expected. The lack of support for teachers incorporating LGBTQ+ history in their classes is itself testament to the slow pace of and obstacles to significant curricular and classroom change. Moreover, there are widespread and often competing opinions on what should happen in schools and classrooms; even in the most progressive environments, teachers encounter backlash when their approach to a topic or situation meets with student, parent, or administrative disapproval. Ten of the twelve teachers encountered resistance at some level, whether from other teachers, administrators, or members of the community (Figure 10.1). They encountered challenges from people in and outside their schools who claimed that this was not “real history” and didn’t need to be taught,² had to respond to parents and colleagues who deemed their sources inappropriate,³ and battled long-standing ignorance or misperceptions of LGBTQ+ history and issues.⁴ Some teachers reported persisting in their goal of teaching LGBTQ+-inclusive history despite the constraints of the school year and requirements imposed by standards-based education, both of which posed significant stumbling blocks in this case as they do in many other attempts at curricular change. Given the array of challenges present, these teachers’ efforts to incorporate LGBTQ+ history into the curriculum reflect their beliefs about its necessity and significance in students’ education.

Figure 10.1 Teacher challenges. Teachers reported facing challenges from a variety of sources. Systemic challenges included standards and testing, and structural challenges refer to the way in which a school day or year is organized.

School-Based Challenges

Classes that integrate or focus on LGBTQ+ history, and plans to establish them, were sources of discontent for students and/or teachers at four teachers' schools in this study.⁵ Fred Fox, for example, faced multiple obstacles in his attempt to win approval for his queer history elective. Although many of his colleagues supported his endeavor, some of the more conservative members of his department expressed concerns. Fox recalled, "One [colleague] actually did say that he is not opposed to the class in general; he is just concerned that if we start getting too specialized we won't be teaching the real history."⁶ Though Fox's class and the written proposal he prepared for it demonstrated how it adhered to state standards, colleagues who believed in more traditional US history courses were reticent to support a class in which history would be viewed through a new lens. In fact, Fox stated, the same colleague was so opposed to his elective that he "told all of the counselors that the class wasn't going to run and they shouldn't let students sign up for it."⁷ Though the situation was remedied, it indicated the lengths to which someone would go to defeat that which they opposed and the tenacity necessary to see it through.

For eight of the teachers in this study, student interest in the topic was a primary reason for pursuing LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum. Not all students,

though, are interested in or willing to learn about LGBTQ+ history. Teachers in this study who taught before LGBTQ+ issues were more openly discussed, as well as current teachers in more conservative regions, encountered students who explicitly and implicitly resisted or refused to learn this material. Additionally, teachers in this study opine that student and parent opposition to including LGBTQ+ history is among the most significant reasons why it is not present in more classrooms; in the regions where these teachers work, this reticence is often based more on a lack of awareness or resistance to change than hostility or homophobia.⁸ Dana Rosenberg, who taught in the 1990s and early 2000s, related that, while many of her students appreciated that she incorporated this material, each year there were some for whom she had to offer alternative assignments after they refused to participate in her LGBTQ+ history research project. While she surmised that several used their belief systems as an excuse to avoid work altogether, it was nevertheless significant that, each year, homophobia seemed an appropriate and compelling argument against completing a class assignment.⁹ Furthermore, Lyndsey Schlax, whose LGBTQ+ history elective was first offered in 2015, reported that, although she encountered no negative parental reaction and students intentionally signed up for her class, some changed their minds when they understood its scope and purpose. She said, “I lost a couple of kids at the beginning of the year when I sent home the syllabus and it said in big bold letters, ‘We’re going to be talking about sexuality ... because of the nature of this class and our connection to arts there may be some exposure to nudity and mature topics.’”¹⁰ She never heard from the students or parents; they simply dropped the class.

Hasmig Minassian commented on the heteronormativity in classroom settings, and the way in which it has the potential to hinder LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum and create a feeling of “otherness” among students who identify as LGBTQ+. As she asserted, the additional steps necessary to prepare a class to learn this material and the way in which teachers need to rethink their language and perspective in order to do so might be too difficult for some teachers to undertake. Comparing this to other marginalized groups, she contended, “At first, we had to make people feel good about being a woman and then including them in history became a lot easier, but this is a dual step that we don’t have with white men who are straight. I didn’t ever have to make my white students feel good about being white and then teach them history.”¹¹ For Minassian, preparing her students to learn this history, and, in particular, encouraging LGBTQ+ students for whom learning this history might have the greatest benefit to embrace their identity and open themselves to that experience, was a

challenge specific to teaching LGBTQ+ history. The perspectives and biases with which students enter class, then, can pose a significant obstacle to this particular curricular change.

Administrative Resistance

Opposition from one's superiors can have a chilling effect on intentions and practices, especially in education where school administrators and district and Board of Education officials can dictate what and how information is conveyed. Even in districts where administrative officials rarely participate at the classroom level, where significant change is afoot or controversy might arise, those in power, the teachers reported, often become involved.

Some administrators prioritize the possible problems with integrating potentially controversial information, which might be conceived as inappropriate by people whose needs schools attempt to meet. Administrative reaction to LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum differed widely. Teachers like Olivia Cole and Courtney Anderson feel wholeheartedly supported by their administrations in this endeavor.¹² Mitchell James, meanwhile, noted the relative silence he faces regarding LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum; for James, this gives him the freedom to do as he sees fit.¹³ Others, though, encountered explicit resistance. Will Scott, for example, hoped to bring the conversation about LGBTQ+ history and experiences into his classroom when he taught in the 1990s. Because his school viewed this material as appropriate mainly as it applied to violence prevention, administrators prioritized bringing in outside speakers over using teachers and class time as resources.¹⁴

Furthermore, administrators' personal interpretations of teachers' practices and results can pose obstacles. Lyndsey Schlax, who collected data from her students to assess their opinions on her class and what they learned, related that the head of her social studies department misrepresented this data to the Board of Education to suggest that the only compelling aspect of Schlax's class was her guest speakers, thus severely undermining her efforts and presenting an inaccurate portrayal of the impact of her course.¹⁵ These diverse reactions can hamper teachers' efforts to make their curriculum more inclusive. When the administrators whose support teachers seek withhold it, it is that much more difficult to attempt something new.

Backlash against teaching LGBTQ+ history comes from officials beyond the school level, as well. Dana Rosenberg, Fred Fox, and Lyndsey Schlax were all forced to overcome pushback regarding teaching practices and materials at

the district level in order to proceed. Dana Rosenberg encountered backlash “from the district in trying to use materials they didn’t feel were appropriate and mostly because they were too political or they want textbooks.” She said, however, that though she “had to confront a lot of bigotry in that district,” once she entered her classroom she felt free from those constraints; she was, she said, “in her own world” and “had a lot of autonomy.”¹⁶ The district’s response, then, did not prevent Rosenberg from fulfilling her teaching philosophy.

Fox and Schlax shared similar experiences of defending the necessity of their electives to district representatives. Fox described navigating policies, prejudices, and officials’ ideas of appropriateness in his effort to win approval for his elective. He related, “One of the weird obstacles ... was the fact that the district has a problem with us offering this class because ... they said queer history should be in a regular history classroom, why isn’t it?” Though Fox would personally like to see greater integration in US history classrooms, resistance in his district prevented that from occurring; this comment to him, therefore, was both odd and hypocritical.¹⁷ Schlax faced a similar situation, defending her class against the argument, “We have a US history class. Let’s just infuse it there”; she, too, added, “Knowing that that’s not going to work because you’ve been telling people to just infuse it there for ages and you’ve got like five people doing it.”¹⁸ In Schlax’s estimation, “it can be really hard working within a complex bureaucratic system and trying to do something radical.”¹⁹ Arguments for broader inclusion in survey courses, which to that point had not happened in Fox’s or Schlax’s district, seem like positive steps at face value; to Fox and Schlax, though, they were backhanded attempts to curtail the more immersive experiences that the two teachers proposed.²⁰ Moreover, Fox’s district’s legal committee stalled on approving his class because though they searched for other examples of such courses to serve as precedent, they had trouble locating that information; for Fox this, too, represented the need for, rather than a reason to deny, his class.²¹ The dearth of LGBTQ+ history education in schools, based on Schlax’s and Fox’s cases, can therefore be self-perpetuating.

Structural and Systemic Issues

Time is one of teachers’ greatest enemies. There is never enough of it, either in a class period or in an academic year. This is an oft-cited reason among teachers who do not include LGBTQ+ history in their classes and a stumbling block for those intent on doing so. Two of the teachers, Mitchell James and Melanie Wells, explicitly stated that they wished they had the time to include more.²²

Wells modifies her unit on *Rebel without a Cause* and gay life in the 1950s each year, deciding which materials she will and will not be able to include based on the time remaining in the school year.²³ Similarly, Mitchell James stated, “I can say that in my AP history class sometimes time does not afford us to cover as much as we would like”; he often chooses, therefore, to do one in-depth unit on LGBTQ+ history rather than “throw it in willy-nilly as just a mere mention.”²⁴

Time precludes people from incorporating LGBTQ+ history because, with very few exceptions, there is little to nothing about it in state or local standards. The emphasis on standards-based education and assessment, according to Hasmig Minassian, means that students do not hear about LGBTQ+ history until high school, if at all, as teachers race to cover mandated topics and often omit others.²⁵ Felicia Perez concurs. She argued, “I don’t believe that our best foot forward is spending so much money on testing and on test prep and on getting our students to—will they be able to accurately assess if letter C is better than letter E”; this, she pointed out, gets in the way of real curriculum development.²⁶ Struggles that all teachers face on a daily basis, then, even more adversely impact upon attempts to bring LGBTQ+ history, or anything slightly divergent, into the curriculum. Moreover, LGBTQ+ history’s absence from state standards and the impact of this omission are a thread through each aspect of this effort from the creation of resources to attempts to make history classes move inclusive. It therefore makes sense that the teachers interviewed would cite standards and testing as a challenge to incorporating LGBTQ+ history in their classrooms.

Debates about the state of education, meanwhile, frequently focus on class size, resource availability, and teacher training. Each of these factors, the teachers interviewed claimed, impact one’s ability to incorporate LGBTQ+ history. Parents and educators throughout the country advocate for smaller classes, which studies show improve students’ learning.²⁷ Olivia Cole, whose self-contained special education classes are, by law and necessity, small, contended that class size is significant to her ability to interact with and meet her students’ needs. She asserted that she would not be able to include LGBTQ+ history in a larger setting.²⁸ Felicia Perez also referred to smaller classes, positing that funds allocated for testing would be better spent on decreasing class size and supporting resource development. Effective teaching, Perez contended, is based on providing high quality, appropriate resources for students. The lack of this, in addition to the lack of uniformity in resources and textbooks, make it more difficult to teach in general and certainly more difficult to teach complicated and new subject matter.²⁹

Teachers cannot teach what they do not know. While this is certainly a matter of being comfortable in the classroom, it is even more because when teachers are unaware of historical events and contributions they also have no idea that they are omitting them from the curriculum. Lyndsey Schlax knew little about LGBTQ+ history before she was approached to teach her elective; she now believes that this ignorance and the absence of this information in teacher-training programs must be remedied for LGBTQ+ history to be meaningfully included in the curriculum. She asserted, “I think it’s important to look at the education that our future teachers are getting. If you don’t know what you don’t know, then you’re not going to include it when you become a teacher and we’re just going to perpetuate stuff. We’re going to perpetuate invisibility.”³⁰

Will Scott and Felicia Perez, too, claimed that teachers’ knowledge gap is a significant obstacle to incorporating LGBTQ+ history. Scott transitioned into teacher education when he left the classroom. In this role, Scott coaches “with LGBT sensitivity in mind” and works with teachers to “figure out how to teach LGBT history in classrooms.”³¹ Changing teacher education, as Wendy Rouse is trying to do at San Jose State University, and preparing teachers intellectually and emotionally to facilitate lessons on LGBTQ+ history, is an integral first step in making inclusive curriculum more widespread.

Community Reaction

Americans tend to have opinions about the state of education and what students learn. Many want schools, especially those that their children attend, to propagate beliefs and ideas similar to their own. Teaching controversial issues and integrating “new” information into history classes—whether it is LGBTQ+ history in the twenty-first century or civil rights in the mid to late twentieth century—has the power to upset these desires and expectations. Resistance, then, comes not only from the people connected to the school but also from the community at large.

Melanie Wells discussed the ways in which she is mindful of the conservative community in which she teaches when she incorporates LGBTQ+ history in her US history classes. She stated, “I try to weave it in a little bit and touch on it and make references without beating kids over the head with it.”³² This strategy helps Wells fulfill her goal of normalizing this history while also ensuring that, for the most part, students are comfortable with the information presented. Because she is careful, tactical, and respectful of the community in which she teaches,

Wells is able to implement her own philosophy without meeting resistance in a community that she described as heavily populated by people who supported Donald Trump and his policies leading up to the 2016 election.³³ Working within the confines of her environment enables Wells to balance everyone's needs.

Resistance to inclusive curriculum is not specific to conservative communities. Even in more left-leaning environments, there are people who oppose the inclusion of information with which they disagree or that they believe is inappropriate for a school setting. In San Francisco, home to one of the nation's largest LGBTQ+ populations, Lyndsey Schlax encountered significant backlash. Schlax recalled, "I got several threatening letters delivered to the school and emails, people trying to save me ... that's a pretty standard experience for people who are doing LGBT activism work ... but it is new for a lot of social studies teachers."³⁴ Though the threats abated, they represented a high level of resistance for which Schlax, an educator, was not prepared. Extreme backlash, then, can exist in the most unexpected places and can have the power to scare a teacher away from exploring something that could engender such a negative reaction.

The existence of LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum as well as queer history electives does not always equate with school or community acceptance of these endeavors. Although there is some safety in the comfort of one's classroom, teacher testimony suggests it is likely that one will face a reaction, either positive or negative, on the other side of the door where LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum is concerned. The most significant challenge, then, is how teachers—especially those in regions where there will be as many or more people supporting the effort to integrate LGBTQ+ history as those who oppose it³⁵—move past the obstacles in their way to incorporate information that is, in fact, a part of the historical narrative they teach.

Impact at the Grassroots

Educators who incorporate LGBTQ+ history in their curricula believe that doing so creates positive change among their students, in their classes, and, hopefully, in the larger school community. Though most of their efforts remain local, they believe it is possible for these efforts to become more widespread.³⁶ It is impossible and inaccurate to apply twelve teachers' experiences to the wider field of historical education; the work they do in their classrooms and the changes that they believe it creates happen, for now, in their own classrooms and communities. They are a beachhead in this movement in the same vein as

the educators developing curriculum and the activists who fought for the FAIR Education Act. Their personal reflections speak to the positive impact of their inclusive curricula and the possibilities that exist when students find themselves in situations where the information they receive opens their minds. For these teachers and their students, then, LGBTQ+-inclusive historical curricula enhance students' historical knowledge, allow them to make connections between the past and the present, and provide students with the more complete historical narrative to which their teachers believe they are entitled. According to the teachers, their students—regardless of their sexuality or gender identity—and, to varying extents, other members of the school or local community benefit from learning LGBTQ+ history.

Knowledge Acquired

Education seeks to do many things. First and foremost, though, educators impart knowledge, the acquisition and retention of which among students represents success. The majority of teachers in this study reported that, in their assessment, students left their classes feeling more knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ history and better able to think critically about LGBTQ+-relevant issues. Lyndsey Schlax and Danny M. Cohen reached this conclusion based on survey data and written responses, while others, like Olivia Cole and Fred Fox, noticed students' increased comfort level and ability to converse about LGBTQ+-related topics. These and other signs of success, as well as students' overall ability to retain and apply this information, were personally and professionally meaningful.

Lyndsey Schlax, Olivia Cole, and Hasmig Minassian each stated that most or all of their students had “zero exposure” to LGBTQ+ history before entering their classes. All three also reported, though, that most or all of their students felt better versed in this history than at the start of the year when their classes concluded. In order to demonstrate the merits of her elective, Schlax conducted an end-of-term survey to assess student takeaways and reactions. According to her data, “75% of students reported that they knew little or nothing about LGBTQ+ history before taking the class. And after taking the class, 100% of them report that they believe they know a lot, which was described as ‘more than most people my age.’”³⁷ Cole, who estimated that 90 percent of her students have no prior exposure to this history, stated that they leave her class aware of and comfortable discussing this history. She said, “The best part is my little advocates and these kids who went from not being able to say the word gay

and thinking girlfriend was a bad word to now they can communicate with me and communicate with others about it.”³⁸ For Cole and her students, this is a significant victory. Minassian reported that students leave her class equipped with knowledge of Stonewall and the AIDS epidemic and, more importantly, a sense that the LGBTQ+ population is not different or separate from every other group that students learn about and encounter in their daily lives.³⁹ The work of these three teachers, then, results in over one hundred students each year knowing about and understanding the nuances of LGBTQ+ history.

Learning something new, something of which one was previously unaware, can, in certain circumstances, be equivalent to removing blinders that they have worn up to that point. Mitchell James, Melanie Wells, and Fred Fox referred to this eye-opening effect in evaluating the impact of LGBTQ+-inclusive history education on their students. James’s AIDS unit, he stated, exposes students to information in a way that they’ve never received it before, facilitating their understanding of the subject matter and the world at large.⁴⁰ Wells, meanwhile, talked about watching her students’ facial reactions as they understood that Plato in *Rebel without a Cause* was gay and all the implications surrounding that; she also commented that students are savvier in identifying that aspect of Plato’s character than in the past.⁴¹ According to Fox, “kids were just blown away. They were like, ‘I cannot believe it,’ because they’re like, ‘How did I never know this happened? How did I never know that they used to think gays were diseased and they would put them in jail?’”⁴² For Fox, this moment of enlightenment is one of the reasons he feels compelled to teach LGBTQ+ history. Assessing his students’ learning, he stated, “It wasn’t a room full of queer students and yet they still found these amazing personal connections to the topics, so that is also very rewarding.”⁴³

Courtney Anderson similarly described students’ engagement and excitement when they begin to use what they learned about LGBTQ+ history to make connections between this population and other groups. She recalled, “That’s when our discussion becomes really, really helpful for some of the students who weren’t making those larger connections to other more historical events and that’s where they get to be like, ‘Oh, yes, you’re right. I never thought about that.’ That’s a really cool aha moment to see on a kid’s face.”⁴⁴ Teacher observations suggest that this level of understanding, in which students wordlessly react to the information they learn, indicates the extent to which incorporating LGBTQ+ history can build knowledge and understanding as well as change a student’s relationship to his or her learning experience as a whole.

Shifting Perspectives

The information students receive in class can have the power to better inform or change their ideas as well as dispel biases. Four of the teachers, in fact, remarked that they observed a sea change among their students based on the information disseminated and discussions in which they participated in class.

Hasmig Minassian, whose overall goal is to normalize her students' views and ideas about the LGBTQ+ community, spoke specifically about working to break down students' prejudices. She stated, "You spend a lot of time in your classroom working through people's individual homophobias and I think that's just real."⁴⁵ Minassian strives to help her students understand that identifying as LGBTQ+ is not synonymous with a negative lifestyle and that this population has, historically and presently, made meaningful contributions to society.⁴⁶ Minassian strongly believes and sees it as a sign of success when students let go of the idea that there is an "other."⁴⁷ Melanie Wells's goals are similar, though her tactics are subtler. By inserting small mentions about LGBTQ+ history throughout the year, Wells removes the stigma for many of her students and builds their comfort level, as well. Wells's students, she asserted, are curious about this information; by the end of the year, it's simply part of the conversation.⁴⁸

Courtney Anderson, meanwhile, instills the idea of intersectionality in her students through their study of LGBTQ+ history. Anderson sees history as intersectional and laments that it is too often taught as compartmentalized events. Teaching social movements together allows her to share this intersectional lens with her students in an accessible, organic way. She asserted, "The best way of going about this is to do it in a way you're integrating organically ... so the civil rights ... women's rights ... gay rights ... every other rights movement is happening at the same time." Intersectionality, an important and complicated concept, is thus easier to comprehend because, as Anderson deduced, "we understand that we can fit into multiple groups but when those groups are interacting on a broader level and intersecting on a broader level, it's hard to compartmentalize history."⁴⁹ Changes in perspective do not require radical shifts in a person's thought process. A new perspective can derive from refocusing how one sees and conceptualizes their surroundings or a better understanding of a new idea or philosophy. For these teachers, integrating LGBTQ+ history enables these changes, big and small, to occur.

Teachers have many different reasons for including LGBTQ+ history in their classes. Among Olivia Cole's goals is "to take away some of these things that

they've been taught over and over and over again." She stated, "I always want to expand their minds. I want them to go further."⁵⁰ Cole's goals are admirable, yet potentially challenging when students' backgrounds and home lives have already instilled particular perspectives. By the end of the year, though, Cole has witnessed real change. She said, "I no longer hear any [derogatory] words in my classroom. They've learned and if they hear someone else they correct each other, which is pretty cool. I was like, 'I'm never going to see the changes. Gay is always going to be an insult,' but I saw it happen in my little classroom universe."⁵¹ As Cole witnessed, providing students access to facts and historical information and guiding them in the process of making connections can positively impact the way in which students think about people they once perceived as different or inferior.

Improving School Climate

Evaluating the accomplishments of her LGBTQ+ history classes, Casey Sinclair stated,

I mean it was liberating to just be able to talk about this, to have a safe, supportive, inquisitive, curious environment where sometimes students would be like, what you just said was offensive, and that was okay ... maybe that's because we don't all know everything yet, right? So fostering that kind of environment where you're both protecting students from, not protecting them but facilitating both growth and also safety, right? But not sacrificing growth for safety is really important.⁵²

A preponderance of the literature on and efforts to build LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum focus on school climate and creating safe, accepting environments. Anti-bullying initiatives and changing the language and terminology students use—the latter a focal point for history teachers, as well—therefore frequently takes precedence over teaching history. As Sinclair attested, though, history classes and the discussions that they foster can significantly change the way students relate to each other and their teachers.

According to Dana Rosenberg, instruction is more authentic, and students are more engaged, when the subject matter is important to the teacher and not a random topic plucked from a school's history curriculum.⁵³ Doing this, she believes, facilitates the student-teacher relationship; teachers become real people as opposed to standards-spouting cogs and students, by virtue of their teachers' authenticity, feel acknowledged, as well. This connection was important to Rosenberg as a teacher, as she declared, "it was almost always a coming out process to teach the

unit because it's so personal, and I guess that it's made a lot more engaging because that is always one of my qualities as a teacher, to have a really close relationship with my students."⁵⁴ Olivia Cole acknowledged a similar phenomenon, in which sharing her life and inserting herself in what she teaches fosters an environment of trust and compassion. Because of this, she related, learning occurs in more meaningful ways for all of her students, most or all of whom do not identify as LGBTQ+, than if she, as the teacher, was an aloof authority figure.⁵⁵

For students who identify as LGBTQ+, the inclusion of this history and the presence of an accepting teacher can make a real difference in their lives. Felicia Perez, who mentored several students in her time as a teacher, forming lasting bonds with them and their families, credited the freedom to make her own pedagogical choices with making her classroom a safe and engaging place in which students thrived. Having the space to introduce, discuss, and navigate LGBTQ+ history with her students, and provide them with the opportunity to feel less alone was, for Perez, a defining aspect of her career.⁵⁶ A great deal of the history students learn in every unit of study is in some way about people forging identities, engaging in conflict, resolving disputes, and struggling to be seen. These are valuable lessons that are extraordinarily relevant to the LGBTQ+ experience and necessary for all regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity. In fact, Lyndsey Schlax asserted that, in the years since her school began offering her LGBTQ+ history elective, "the school, as a whole, is better at being responsive."⁵⁷ It makes sense, then, that these teachers assert that exploring these ideas, in and outside the context of LGBTQ+ history, will build on and build from the relationships established in a collaborative classroom.

Leave Them Wanting More

When students are immersed in what they learn and engaged by new discoveries, the end of a class or a semester comes too soon; there is so much more to know than what may feasibly be squeezed into a class period. Five of the teachers in this study experienced this with their students. Having learned and analyzed information that stunned them and, in some cases, angry at an educational system that previously hid this history from them, students exposed to LGBTQ+ history continued to seek answers and became advocates for its inclusion.

LGBTQ+ history, to an extent, is a study of human rights violations. Several of the topics that teachers cover in their classes, from immigration to the Lavender Scare to the Supreme Court, illustrate the ways in which the LGBTQ+ population has been excluded, restricted, and discriminated against in US history. Rights

violations, regardless of the group in question, are subjects that tend to engage and enrage high school students; in an LGBTQ+-inclusive class, this reaction is exacerbated by the fact that unlike other groups, many students are learning of this mistreatment and the laws and actions that supported and bolstered it for the first time. Courtney Anderson, who devotes class time to studying legal restrictions that LGBTQ+ Americans faced, explained her students' interest in this history with a simple statement: "Once you get kids pissed, their buy-in is so much better."⁵⁸ Students, Anderson and others posited, are angered not only by what they learn but also by the fact that this information wasn't previously revealed. Felicia Perez stated that queer history, the importance of which was abundantly clear to her students by the way she decorated her room, "was not something they had learned before." Rather than fear the new material, though, she said, "It was making them angry. They were like, 'Why didn't we learn about this in the elementary school? Why didn't we learn about this in junior high? I'm so glad we're learning about this now.'"⁵⁹ Teacher evidence suggests that this anger, regardless of whether it derives from what students learn or the fact that they have never learned it before, sustains their investment in the subject matter after the discussion or class concludes.

It is impossible to know what one does not know. It is a conundrum that historians and scholars have pondered and reflected upon ad nauseum. It is also a question that Lyndsey Schlax, Felicia Perez, and their students encounter repeatedly in their study of LGBTQ+ history, the elusive answer to which motivates students to search for knowledge even after class ends and grades are entered. Schlax's end of semester survey asks students "What else do you want to know? What else do you want to learn?" and the most common response is, "I don't know, because I don't know what I don't know." In Schlax's estimation, "That realization is huge. They came to the end of this class and they're like, 'Oh gosh! There's so much stuff that I don't know, and I have no idea what it is.'"⁶⁰ Though this is frustrating for some of Schlax's students, it is an impetus to discovery for others. Similarly, after their introduction to queer history and its nuances, Perez's students questioned what they do and do not learn in their history classes and the reasons behind inclusion and exclusion. Perez contended that it is imperative to consider these questions, saying, "As they leave the classroom they need to be able to have these frames that they're constantly looking at and considering, in terms of who is and isn't being talked about and why ... Is that done deliberately? Are people being left out on purpose? Who's not involved in this story? Who's telling the story?"⁶¹ In other words, then, Perez hoped her students would continue to search for and find the information and the stories that they did not know and consider whether those stories were complete.

Schlax stated that, through her class, she hopes her students will see the world differently; go from being color blind to seeing the entire spectrum of colors. Recognizing and understanding that there is a world of knowledge to explore fulfills that goal.⁶² Awakening students' curiosity and having them realize how much there is to discover, teachers assert, is a powerful impact of LGBTQ+-inclusive history. Students encounter the same historical events and trends so often throughout their education that the idea that there is more to learn on these topics can seem preposterous. Schlax's and Perez's students' reactions illustrate that when presented with new, controversial information, students are flooded by innumerable questions and the realization that there is, in fact, so much of which they are unaware. Learning LGBTQ+ history in school can compel students to ask questions outside of it.

Effective history and civics education has the power to inspire students to act. Casey Sinclair witnessed this effect in her LGBTQ+ history class. She recalled, "I saw a lot of people really grow into activists during that time. Some people who were already activists and who just grew more and became more interested and involved and vocal and confident in themselves."⁶³ Furthermore, Cole shared that one of her students, a male who knew little about the LGBTQ+ community before her class, later advocated for a transgender teammate on the school's baseball team when others opposed his participation.⁶⁴ Moreover, Fox's students advocated for and conducted research to support the need for a "lavender graduation" for LGBTQ+ students; though they did not have enough time to turn that goal into a reality when they came up with the idea, subsequent groups of students continue to work for this cause.⁶⁵ Meaningful, engaging education that challenges students to think about the world and their place in it can be extremely powerful. The LGBTQ+ community and rights movement have accomplished a lot in a relatively short period of time, but their struggles continue and are increasingly prominent in the national conversation. Teacher testimony and the stories they share indicate that learning this history contextualizes current events and provides students with a foundation they can use to support their own evolving opinions. Not all students are activists, but, as these anecdotes show, given the tools, all students can be active.

History Revealed

According to Dana Rosenberg, "our society does not have a historical memory and it's really devastating to our future."⁶⁶ Rosenberg delivered this lament while discussing her desire for history to feel like a living thing for her students, though

she worried that this was difficult, if not impossible. This historical amnesia, willful and involuntary acts of forgetting and silencing, is the focus of teachers and organizations dedicated to integrating LGBTQ+ history into classrooms and people's general consciousness. These educators' efforts contribute to making that goal a reality; all of their students are more aware of and able to speak to the complex and complicated narrative that is LGBTQ+ history. LGBTQ+ history has long been suppressed and erased, not only in classrooms but also in more general retellings of history; this creates a vicious cycle in which people unaware of this history unintentionally perpetuate the silence around it. Felicia Perez asserted that teaching LGBTQ+ history pushes students to talk about things that largely remain unsaid.⁶⁷ These teachers' efforts, and their students' knowledge, retention, inquisitiveness, and application of these concepts, therefore, illustrate that LGBTQ+-inclusive history education is indeed impactful.

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Each of these educators offers his or her students a historical learning experience that includes LGBTQ+ history in meaningful ways. They all do so differently, operating within the structures, circumstances, and environments specific to their schools and the classes that they teach. For all, including LGBTQ+ history enriches their teaching and their students' education in myriad ways. Their students, they contend, are more aware and knowledgeable of LGBTQ+ history and issues than their peers.

In addition, the teachers hope that others will accept their actions and, possibly, follow the precedent they set. In fact, those who have left the classroom mentor teachers who wish to incorporate LGBTQ+ history. They are aware of, and have faced, the challenges to inclusive curriculum, some to a greater extent than others. Yet, they not only continue and refine their practice but also took the time to contribute their experiences to this study in the hope of reaching other, similarly inclined educators. They are, therefore, the roots of a movement to the same extent as the founders of GLSEN and GSA. A grassroots movement, after all, requires multiple seeds.

The teacher reported impact of these classes and this information on students offers initial proof that LGBTQ+ history is essential to students' study of US history. Students learn to critically evaluate the past and the present, applying historical lessons to current events like transgender rights.⁶⁸ They learn to think differently and question sources and information, delving deeper into what they think they know to find out the answers that they have not yet discovered.⁶⁹ Students are inspired to learn and their minds are opened to possibilities that

they didn't previously know existed, largely because their teachers showed them that there was so much left for them to discover.⁷⁰ Lastly, history builds understanding and compassion, especially as students discover it together. As Lyndsey Schlax posited, "[the LGBTQ+ history class] showed me quite a lot about the power that visibility and responsive curriculum can have not only on an individual student or a classroom, but a school, and the teacher, and the wider community that the school is located in."⁷¹ Regardless of the LGBTQ+ content teachers choose to convey, the observed outcomes of their efforts reflect the power of this subject matter.

The vast majority of these teachers (eleven) work in liberal-minded areas. Many of them, especially among those currently in the classroom, reported that their students are aware of LGBTQ+ issues in the news today.⁷² Melanie Wells, who asserted that many of her students and their parents support Donald Trump, also stated that her students are aware of and curious to learn more about the issues facing the LGBTQ+ community.⁷³ Some of the teachers reflected upon their students' lack of personal experience with LGBTQ+ individuals and current events pertaining to that community. Olivia Cole, for example, posited that she was the first LGBTQ+ person that many of her students encountered,⁷⁴ and, in the 1990s, Will Scott felt uncomfortable revealing his own sexuality or bringing up history or issues important to the LGBTQ+ community in his class in Los Angeles.⁷⁵ Moreover, though many of the students were aware of and had opinions about issues facing the LGBTQ+ population today, few knew anything of the history preceding those current events.⁷⁶ Liberal enclaves, then, provide a forum in which exploring this material is acceptable and, in many cases, welcomed; this acceptance, though, does not replace the need for context and information. As the teachers reported, augmenting students' knowledge of present-day issues with the history that led to this point helps students to contextualize and better understand the discussions happening around them today. As with many other topics covered in a history class, the baseline knowledge with which students enter requires the supporting evidence that historical education can provide.

Environment is a key factor for many of these teachers. Hasmig Minassian, for example, claimed, "My gay teacher friends in [more conservative] Orange County say they could never do what I do."⁷⁷ Students' readiness to learn and their predisposition to support the LGBTQ+ community offer entry points for curriculum not traditionally taught; the liberal bubble, in this way, provides a safety net for a practice that might be riskier, and possibly not attempted, elsewhere. It is the rare teacher who is willing to put his or her job on the line

to teach material that he or she is specifically instructed not to discuss. Though there are instances of this happening to teachers who strongly believe in the need for LGBTQ+-inclusive education⁷⁸—these teachers are necessary, after all, if a grassroots movement is to be successful—a negative environment in the educational arena more often has a chilling effect than a rebellious one.

None of the teachers in this study encountered LGBTQ+ history in their K–12 education. Five were exposed to it as college undergraduates in their women’s studies and history classes,⁷⁹ but the others were not. Growing up and attending high school in the 1980s and 1990s, though, these teachers were exposed to lessons on other marginalized groups struggling for recognition and existence, many of which also fought for their place in the curriculum. These lessons, and the trend toward inclusion and representation in history classes, prepared them to act as pioneers on this new frontier. As such, they constantly refine their practice, seeking new information and ways to convey it. In 2020, for example, Courtney Anderson related, “We’ve spent the last few years amping up our social living curriculum’s gender and sexuality unit.”⁸⁰ Furthermore, Melanie Wells shared that she established a “genius hour” in her US history classes during which students engage in year-long research projects; “some of the most promising projects,” she said, “were focused on LGBTQ history.”⁸¹ For Anderson, Wells, and others, LGBTQ+-inclusive history teaching is a constantly evolving endeavor.

Teacher education programs and classes can also play a stronger role in augmenting educators’ knowledge of or facility with this material. As Lyndsey Schlax posited, until LGBTQ+ history is a component of teacher education programs its presence in classrooms, where many teachers don’t realize the scope of what they’re omitting, will remain stagnant.⁸² Two of the educators in this study, Will Scott, who works with new and emerging teachers, and Danny M. Cohen, whose organization seeks to equip teachers to introduce LGBTQ+ history into their classes, seek to expand the number of LGBTQ+-inclusive history classes through their work with educators; both understand the need to increase teacher awareness and buy-in for progress to occur.⁸³ While it remains reasonable to assume that the majority of teachers do not learn this information in their own schooling, teacher education programs can prepare their students to integrate LGBTQ+ history into their classes where, hopefully, it self-perpetuates.

Teachers’ assessments and anecdotal evidence related to students’ historical knowledge bolster the rationale and support scholars’ arguments in favor of LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum. Teacher testimony pertaining to how learning LGBTQ+ history changes school culture and community provides further

evidence of why it is a necessary part of a well-rounded and complete historical education and why it is as necessary as school climate and anti-bullying curricula. Though the conclusions drawn from this study are based on teachers' own work and observations and the sample size, and thus evidence gathered, is small in scope, understanding the impact of inclusive history curricula on a small scale gives credence to arguments for these curricular changes on a larger scale. Moreover, the success that these teachers report working on their own indicates the larger potential of inclusive curriculum if the obstacles that prevent other teachers from incorporating this history into their classes were to be removed. The positive experiences and outcomes shared by the teachers in this study are a powerful rejoinder to the arguments against inclusive curriculum.

LGBTQ+ history education, by and large, happens in an echo chamber; many students who are most unaware of this history and for whom it might be most transformative have no chance, for now, of learning it in their US history classes. Including this information, though, is powerful regardless of the overall political atmosphere in the region where that instruction occurs. Given the political divisions regarding support for and opposition to LGBTQ+ rights in the United States, and considering the mission of social studies education, including LGBTQ+ history in the curriculum is essential to this subject fulfilling its goals. As Mitchell James posited in 2017, "it became a lot more common of a topic throughout the year ... particularly because of what was going on also politically in the election of Trump, and the people that he stigmatized and continues to do so along the way. I think it became sort of a more common topic just as a necessity to talk about what was going on in our country."⁸⁴ The 2020 presidential election ushered in a new administration committed to restoring, respecting, and upholding LGBTQ+ rights, but societal rifts remain. These teachers' work is a small and necessary step in addressing a larger problem and, though it is as or more important in states where it is banned, those big moves require the foundation provided by these smaller acts.

Fred Fox credited the courses developed before his queer history class for opening a space in which his class can exist. Fox declared, "There are all kinds of little seeds that have been planted along the way." He is grateful for the efforts of those who forged paths and started conversations and classes focusing on marginalized groups before him because, he said, "A queer history class would not have been the first minority lens acceptable."⁸⁵ Because others came first, Fox's class was approved. Now Fox's class and the classes and practices of all of the teachers in this study are the seeds for what comes next.