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Creating Community: LGBTQ+ Content in Social Studies Classes

LGBTQ+ topics are a necessary aspect of students' education, a fact that is made clear in their proliferation in the content young people consume and their presence in the English and health class resources that students encounter. Moreover, students need to feel safe in their school environments in order to learn; climates in which students regularly confront bias, hatred, harassment, and bullying demand that attention be paid to the ideas and attitudes contributing to those dangers. Efforts and resources that integrate LGBTQ+ topics, then, serve a valuable purpose in addressing issues within the school community and enhancing students' lived and learning experiences.

The National Education Association's Committee on Social Studies established the subject in 1916 as a course of study to develop within students "an appreciation of the nature and laws of social life, a sense of responsibility of the individual as a member of social groups, and the intelligence and the will to participate effectively in the promotion of the social well-being." In the introduction to its report, in a section entitled "Aims of the Social Studies," the committee stated, "The social studies of the American high school should have for their conscious and constant purpose the cultivation of good citizenship."¹ The report recommended a comprehensive curriculum including civics, economics, and sociology in addition to history in its effort to fulfill these goals. This civically minded intention—creating participatory, contributing citizens—remains essential in twenty-first-century social studies education, as well. Resources that aim to build tolerance, bridge gaps, and create community and teach students the skills to do so, like those intended to enhance school climate, reflect social studies' foundational goals.

A change as potentially controversial as integrating LGBTQ+ history in students' academic content is a slow and arduous process. The controversy surrounding the Rainbow Curriculum attests to the resistance encountered

mentioning something as simple as “families can have two mommies” as recently as thirty years ago. The pace of change around widespread anti-bullying curriculum, though, was more rapid. Because LGBTQ+ children and teens encounter harassment and violence more than most other groups, the efforts directed at curtailing bullying created an opportunity to integrate LGBTQ+ content in schools. The resources developed to meet those needs reference historical events, figures, and issues to varying degrees, but they consistently address the larger social studies-related intention of learning to live and work with others to create a well-functioning society and plant the seeds of historical learning upon which students can continue to build.

Battling Bullying

In the early part of the twenty-first century, amid changing ideas of how to teach and raise happy, thriving children, bullying became a national topic of conversation. In fact, in August 2010, the federal government held its first summit on bullying, after which Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, “It is an absolute travesty of our educational system when students fear for their safety at school, worry about being bullied or suffer discrimination and taunts because of their ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability or a host of other reasons. The fact is that no school can be a great school until it is a safe school first.”² Moreover, in December 2011 the federal government released its “Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies” report; the Education Department stated,

The report shows the prevalence of state efforts to combat bullying over the last several years. From 1999 to 2010, more than 120 bills were enacted by state legislatures from across the country to either introduce or amend statutes that address bullying and related behaviors in schools. Twenty-one new bills were enacted in 2010 and eight additional bills were signed into law through April 30, 2011.³

By 2010, then, the full weight of federal and state governments and the institutions under their purview—schools, for example—was behind eradicating bullying.

By September 2017 all fifty states had anti-bullying laws on the books; forty-two had additional policies in place in support of those laws.⁴ Statistics showing that LGBTQ+ children and adolescents endured some of the most brutal bullying led to calls for programs and materials to specifically address bullying

based on gender identity or sexuality. Additionally, the 2010 suicide of Rutgers student Tyler Clementi, who jumped from the George Washington Bridge after his roommate recorded his same-sex sexual encounters, gained national attention and fueled the conversation about addressing bullying as it pertained to LGBTQ+ youth. The It Gets Better project, founded in 2010 in the wake of Clementi's suicide, aimed to "reach out to lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual youth who may be the victims of bullying"⁵ and, according to the organization's website, hoped to connect and build community among LGBTQ+ youth to prevent the isolation and loneliness that can lead to suicide.⁶ Organizations like GLSEN,⁷ GSA, and Welcoming Schools, long at work on making schools safer for LGBTQ+ students, were part of the sea change wherein their efforts were more widely embraced and supported throughout the nation.

Since 2009–10, the government's, LGBTQ+ advocacy groups', and major educational organizations' dedication to LGBTQ-centric anti-bullying efforts have profoundly supported this mission. Bullying was—and remains—a crisis, and bullying based on gender identity or sexuality even more so. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force advocated for more stringent laws and an end to LGBTQ+ bullying, criticizing a 2010 policy in Anoka-Hennepin, Minnesota—a school district where four LGBTQ+ students committed suicide that year—that promoted "'neutrality' in regards [to] discussions of homosexuality"; this was meant to be an improvement over "their 2009 policy that prohibit[ed] teachers from discussing homosexuality as a 'normal, valid lifestyle.'" The Task Force argued, "All school staff need training on effective bullying prevention. Bullying and harassment because of sexual orientation and gender identity must be discussed with young people."⁸ The federal government launched stopbullying.gov in 2012; the website has a page specifically devoted to LGBTQ youth that advises on the best ways to build a safe environment and recommends resources to assist in this process.⁹ Furthermore, the George Lucas Educational Foundation, a national organization focused on developing and promoting innovative, engaging classroom experiences, published an article in favor of inclusive anti-bullying politics based on a 2013 GLSEN report. The article advocated for "ensur[ing] anti-bullying practices are inclusive. ... Rais[ing] awareness among the school community of both the policy in general and the specific LGBT inclusion. ... Provid[ing] professional development on bullying that includes knowledge and skills around LGBT-specific bullying and harassment."¹⁰

Anti-bullying and safe school programs, then, became valuable educational initiatives around which both LGBTQ+ activists and educators in general could rally support. Though scholars and educators published studies and journal

articles earlier in the decade advocating for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ history in social studies classes, their ideas failed to gain similar traction.¹¹ This disparity illustrates the power of institutional support. Where it exists, change occurs; where it does not, attempts at reform remain at the grassroots. According to GLSEN, as of August 2020, twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have “enumerated anti-bullying laws protecting LGBTQ students.”¹² National and local organizations that were already creating curriculum focused on improving school climate, and increasing tolerance, acceptance, and inclusivity for LGBTQ+ students thus increased in prominence as their work became more recognized and valuable amid changing societal ideas.

Bullying is an acknowledged problem with the infrastructure to support targeting it. Therefore, in terms of curriculum development it receives the bulk of advocates’ attention. Many of the organizations developing LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum are primarily focused on the struggles that these students endure in schools where they face insensitivity, discrimination, harassment, and, in the worst cases, violence. Studies indicate that the school environment, a bastion of pressure in general, is especially difficult to navigate for teens who identify as LGBTQ+.¹³ These organizations work to educate all high school students, regardless of their sexuality or gender identity, of the dangerous impact that their actions, words, and attitudes might have on their classmates and the school climate as a whole. For organizations devoted to ameliorating the situation in which LGBTQ+ students find themselves on a daily basis and making school a positive, welcoming place, the majority of resources and curricula they develop focus on achieving that goal. Additionally, as LGBTQ+ students’ plight—and the impact of bullying and environment on children and their learning in general—gained increasing national attention, a growing number of organizations and institutions recognized the need to create resources for schools to address these issues.

The Need for LGBTQ+-Inclusive Curriculum

In 1999, GLSEN began conducting what became its biannual student survey assessing students’ perception of the school environment for LGBT youth. The results offer a glimpse of students’ daily life and, in doing so, help determine the trajectory of its activism. As stated in the preface to the 2019 report,

in this report, we see that the slowing of progress noted in 2017 has continued. Harassment and discrimination remain at unacceptable levels at the national

level. However, given the vicious attacks we have witnessed over the past four years, particularly on transgender youth, it is remarkable that dedicated educators and active student advocates have held the line as powerfully as they have. Despite the tenor of our times, we also find that more and more LGBTQ+ youth have access to the vital in-school supports that can change their lives for the better, particularly as GSA student clubs continue to emerge in more schools nationwide. Increasing presence of the supports can be a leading indicator for positive changes in school climate, making this another sign of hope for the future.¹⁴

The 2019 study, the most recent for which there are published results, revealed that 59.1 percent of the students surveyed felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation; 42.5 percent responded similarly regarding their gender expression.¹⁵ Meanwhile, only 10.9 percent “reported that their school had official policies or guidelines to support transgender and gender nonconforming students.”¹⁶ It is widely acknowledged that inclusive curricula help, yet only 8.2 percent of students surveyed responded that they had access to sex education classes that covered LGBTQ+ topics, and less than 20 percent replied that they had opportunities to learn from LGBTQ+-inclusive textbooks and assigned readings.¹⁷ Furthermore, although 33.2 percent of students said that LGBTQ+ topics were covered in their academic classes, 16.2 percent of the full sample claimed those representations were positive and 13.8 percent encountered negative depictions. Students reported that, when LGBTQ+ content was present, it was more likely to be in history (60.3 percent of those reporting positive representations/11.6 percent of full survey) and English (38 percent/7.3 percent) classes than other subjects.¹⁸

This study offers statistical proof that although nearly half of the LGBTQ+ students surveyed feel supported by the staff and administration,¹⁹ inclusive curriculum is insufficient in many schools and subjects; its positive presence is necessary to making schools safer and more welcoming. There is a direct correlation between these statistics and the percentage of students who reported feeling unsafe. Moreover, though many of these statistics show decreased representation in academics from the 2017 survey, the number of students who reported receiving LGBTQ+ content in their history classes increased.²⁰ The results, therefore, offer a solution: history classes—those in which LGBTQ+ information and issues are already more prevalent and further integrating this material makes instruction more complete—offer an arena in which inclusive curriculum can grow and flourish.

Social Justice in Social Studies

Organizations focused on improving school climate for LGBTQ+ students, as well as others that work to eliminate bias and discrimination on a larger scale, develop and publish inclusive resources designed to accomplish these purposes and address the discomfort and danger made clear by the survey's results. Although these resources often include information on history and current events, it is frequently conveyed in the service of the more civics-oriented objectives of tolerance, discourse, and community building rather than in-depth historical exploration. These resources seek to raise awareness and break down stereotypes while making schools more inclusive environments for all students. History is, therefore, necessarily present, but the lessons address social studies goals more than specific historical objectives.

As a leader in its field and in keeping with its organizational goals, GLSEN offers resources designed to provide students with access to information about LGBTQ+ individuals and their struggles in an effort to have students see themselves in what they learn and enlighten students who do not identify as LGBTQ+ as to their classmates' plight. GLSEN's resources acknowledge and sometimes evolve from historical events and figures, but more often than not they provide the basis for discussions of inclusivity and changing the narrative, rather than in-depth analysis of historical events and circumstances.

Several other organizations focusing on social justice and human rights more generally also develop LGBTQ+-inclusive resources for use in high school classrooms. Similar to GLSEN, these lessons and units are meant to stimulate thought and discussion about both the information with which students are presented and the larger, more substantive ideas that the organizations hope students will grasp through that content. Project Look Sharp, an initiative at Ithaca College, was "designed to promote and support the integration of media literacy and critical thinking into curricula at all grade levels and across instructional areas, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of media literacy education in the schools."²¹ Therefore, according to curriculum writer Sox Sperry, its units, including one on the gay liberation movement, "focus on peace and nonviolence and social justice" using core content as the foundation from which students "think critically about, analyze, and produce media."²² The ADL, established in 1913 "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all," now "speak[s] up for those whose voices are not always heard";²³ its lessons, thus, "focus on current events for which there is an anti-bias and social justice angle."²⁴ The Human Rights Resource Center,

meanwhile, contextualizes its learning activities in the concepts elucidated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It asserts, “One of the most powerful ways to promote the continued evolution of LGBT rights as human rights and to interrupt the cycle of abuses against sexual minorities is through human rights education. ... and learning how to respect others and support and defend their human rights.” Schools, the Human Rights Resource Center contends, are vital to “creating a culture that supports the human rights of all, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons,” but they must first undergo that transformation themselves.²⁵ For each of these organizations, LGBTQ+ history provides the springboard from which students learn about and internalize ideas about climate, culture, harassment, and social justice; this addresses social studies’ mission, but often does not provide the depth of information to enable truly informed discussion. Similar to LGBTQ+ studies, historical learning is more often a piece of the puzzle than the ultimate goal; this piece, though, is a potential building block.

Climate Concerns

Organizations creating curriculum focus on changing school climate and increasing students’ awareness of human rights and diversity with the goal of making schools safer, more welcoming, and more tolerant; these objectives are explicitly stated in many of the resources available to teachers. These materials seek to open students’ minds to the impact of the words and phrases they use; they include studies of identity and self-reflection, the dangers accompanying stereotyping and bullying, and the effects of hatred with the idea that changing young people’s thought process and worldview will compel them to reconsider the way they interact with peers and the communities of which they are a part. They align with anti-bullying objectives and are, therefore, institutionally supported and societally acceptable. Many ask students to look inward and consider their own notions and actions; the conversations they intend to spur are often personal and separate from learning the historical context of discussions present in society today. The goal of these resources is clear: improve the immediate environment for LGBTQ+ students as well as their interaction with students who do not identify as such.

GLSEN, following its mission to create safe schools for LGBTQ+ students, promotes that goal through programs entitled “No Name-Calling Week,” launched in 2004, and “ThinkB4YouSpeak,” established in 2008. Both address social interaction among teenagers and the language used in social situations.

“No Name Calling Week” was inspired by James Howe’s *The Misfits*, a book about four best friends who, tired of being bullied, create a “no name calling” party and run on that platform in their school’s student council elections.²⁶ The lessons, which examine cliques, popularity, labels, and bias, encourage students to examine these things in their own environment and think about how to build community and end harassment. The introduction to “ThinkB4YouSpeak” states, “The campaign aims to raise awareness among straight teens about the prevalence and consequences of anti-LGBT bias and behavior in America’s schools. Ultimately, the goal is to reduce and prevent the use of homophobic language in an effort to create a more positive environment for LGBT teens.”²⁷ These units, and other lessons created by GLSEN, address students’ daily experiences and the habits they form, aiming to reverse trends that create unsafe school environments for LGBT students.

Learning for Justice publishes lessons highlighting the negative impact of homophobic language, actions, and representations in the media. Echoing GLSEN’s “ThinkB4YouSpeak,” Learning for Justice’s lesson on controversial issues asks students to rethink their use of “that’s so gay” using its “Disagree with Grace” activity, which it intends as a paradigm for debating sensitive topics in class.²⁸ “Challenging Gender Stereotyping and Homophobia in Sports,” meanwhile, uses a prevalent activity and media event to foster discussion of the stereotypes students maintain and the ways in which they manifest themselves in a school setting.²⁹ In a 2018 paper on best practices, Learning for Justice espoused, “creating a supportive environment for LGBT students improves educational outcomes for all students, not just those who may identify as LGBT. And remember, it’s not about politics—it’s about supporting students. Any educator, regardless of his personal beliefs, can be a resource for LGBT students.”³⁰ These lessons seek to position teachers and administrators in precisely that role.

The ADL, too, offers lessons on understanding homophobia, gender identity, and the impact of anti-LGBT slurs. Like GLSEN and Learning for Justice, students reflect on the phrase “that’s so gay,” as well as the derivation of the terms “gay, faggot, and dyke” in “The History and Impact of Anti-LGBT Slurs.” In the ADL’s version of this lesson, though, and in keeping with the ADL’s more expansive view of past discrimination, students examine not only the words and their impact but also the “long history of judgment and hate behind these words.”³¹ In “Understanding Homophobia/Heterosexism and How to Be an Ally,” students evaluate categories of bias and injustice including interpersonal, institutionalized, and internalized to better understand homophobia and its

far-reaching effects and “identify ways that they can be an ally to LGBTQ people in their school and community.”³² Meanwhile, “Transgender Identity and Issues” “provide[s] an opportunity for high school students to learn more about transgender identity and issues, the barriers faced by people who identify as transgender or are gender non-conforming and how we can make our schools safe and welcoming for transgender and gender non-conforming students.”³³ As an organization, the ADL exists to bridge the gaps that divide different groups of people and eradicate discrimination. These lessons, all of which explicitly state the objective of creating allies, support that mission.

The Human Rights Resource Center and Project Look Sharp both created units devoted to enhancing students’ understanding of the LGBTQ+ experience and the struggle that community has endured in the United States and abroad in the last fifty years. These units include lessons and activities that inform students and challenge them to think about this history, as well as featuring lessons focused on homophobia, language, and school climate seen through the organizations’ respective lenses of human rights and media literacy. HRRC’s “Words Really Matter,” the first of nine activities in its unit, asks students to “examine the power of words,” “challenge harmful connotations” conveyed by language, and rethink the way they use words that describe sexual orientation.³⁴ In “Gay Affirmative or Gay Negative?” Project Look Sharp uses documentaries and popular youth-oriented television series to “review intolerance directed at lesbian and gay people” and evaluate the influence of words and images on people’s thoughts and ideas.³⁵ These lessons, like “ThinkB4YouSpeak” and others targeting phrases such as “that’s so gay,” alert students to behaviors and habits formed over the course of time and the negative impact these actions and statements intentionally and inadvertently have on their environment. Both organizations also include lessons on challenging homophobia, compelling students to consider creating environments absent of this bias. The HRRC provides students with testimony from teenagers who encountered homophobia while Project Look Sharp’s lesson focuses on music and lyric analysis; both, though, ask students to analyze messages conveyed and how those messages might serve as catalysts for change. There are multiple angles, then, from which similar goals might be achieved.

Organizations focused specifically on developing and producing LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum like GLSEN, Learning for Justice, and the Human Rights Resource Center are not alone in their mission to create environments in which students feel safe and accepted and in which learning, rather than resisting bias and harassment, can be the priority for all. This is the focus of the majority of LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula, regardless of content. Surveys, studies, scholarship,

and common sense indicate that in order for learning to take place, students need to feel safe and secure in their environment, sentiments undermined by bullying and harassment. Attempts at improving school climate and changing the culture are essential for all students whether they identify as LGBTQ+ or not. Furthermore, these resources and the intentions supporting them echo the calls to end harassment that encompassed the *raison d'être* of the Stonewall-era gay rights movement. These resources, then, make history in their own way. In an era where anti-bullying initiatives are a national educational focus, these lessons receive the institutional support and promotion that might allow more in-depth study of LGBTQ+ issues in their wake.

History as a Springboard

Resources that seek to create safe spaces also invoke historical events and figures to demonstrate the ways in which moments and individuals can be catalysts for change. These materials challenge students to navigate social justice issues and understand how identifying societal problems can lead to change. In 1916 the NEA asserted that it was more important for students to “be given experience and practice in the observation of social phenomena” and “understand that every social problem is many-sided and complex” than to focus exclusively on content knowledge.³⁶ Social justice-oriented LGBTQ+-inclusive resources aim to fulfill that goal and equip students with the skills they need to address homophobia, intolerance, and hatred.

Project Look Sharp’s curriculum on Media Construction of Social Justice includes an overview lesson entitled “Out and Affirmed” that uses print and digital media sources to guide students through the gay liberation movement from 1960 to the present; this lesson is meant to provide students with background information that they need to explore the topics and themes in the aforementioned “Gay Affirmative or Gay Negative?” which asks students to consider media representations of LGBTQ+ people and communities and their ramifications on thoughts and behaviors. Project Look Sharp chose to build a unit on gay liberation specifically because it is often omitted from textbooks; LGBTQ+ issues, according to Sox Sperry, are “not just twenty-first century issues, these are historic issues throughout U.S. history. They’re just not attended to.”³⁷ “Out and Affirmed” and its broad sweep through history exist largely to provide information and fill gaps so that students are able to think deeply about the LGBTQ+ experience.

Matthew Shepard, whose torture and death because of his sexuality brought national attention to hate crimes, was a tragic catalyst for gay rights advocacy. He is the subject of lessons published by GLSEN and the ADL. In the introduction to GLSEN's "He Continues to Make a Difference," author Leslea Newman asserts, "When someone is reduced to a slur, he or she becomes, in the eyes of the tormentor, less than human. He or she becomes, in a tormentor's eyes, someone of no consequence, someone who doesn't matter, someone—or something—easy to destroy."³⁸ Like the majority of LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum, the authors' goal here is to increase awareness and sensitivity and reduce incidents of bullying; the curriculum guide includes social studies questions contextualizing the events surrounding and implications of Matthew Shepard's murder. The ADL's "Current Events Classroom" lesson focused on the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act is more social studies oriented than interdisciplinary; it examines hate crimes, in general, and the circumstances surrounding Shepard's and Byrd's deaths, specifically.³⁹ Learning for Justice offers a similar lesson, reviewing this act and the circumstances that birthed it.⁴⁰ This lesson, like the ADL's, considers the nature of hate and the effectiveness of legislation meant to put an end to its violent effects. These lessons explore hatred in general, illustrating that, though Byrd and Shepard were different, hate is not defined by race or sexuality. This construct provides students with a valuable opportunity to discuss hate and ways to overcome it, but it needs more historical context for students to fully understand the legislation's passage and significance.

Unlike historical lessons that require in-depth examinations of cause and effect and ask students to synthesize new information with what they know of the past, these lessons acknowledge the history but look more closely at broader themes and skill building to accomplish their objectives. Hate, and its impact throughout history, is a recurrent theme in social studies classes where students learn the root of it in different groups, places, and times and develop a sense of its impact. Meaningful discussions on hatred and the crimes committed in its name also break down barriers between groups and, potentially, combat bias and discrimination in schools and societies, accomplishing the goals espoused by GLSEN, the ADL, and Learning for Justice. Though it is important to address and overcome hate as a concept, these lessons could be more impactful if they didn't remove hatred and its effects from their source. Here, a balance between skills and deeper content would be worthwhile.

Curriculum developers aiming to connect students with the LGBTQ+ experience on a personal level also create materials focused on individuals'

struggles and/or contributions. LGBTQ+ history is rife with important individuals, be they leaders of the gay rights or other social movements or people whose circumstances or plights serve as a springboard to awareness and action. Similar to lessons focused on Matthew Shepard, examining these individuals' lives offers students the opportunity to gain a clearer understanding of history and its impact on the present. Advocates of LGBTQ+-inclusive history curriculum emphasize the importance of incorporating Bayard Rustin in discussions of US history.⁴¹ Youth in Motion, an organization that provides LGBTQ+-themed films to GSAs and schools, offers students the opportunity to learn about Rustin in its curriculum guide to accompany *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*, a documentary that emphasizes his civil rights work and the impact of his sexuality on his position in the movement. Youth in Motion's curriculum, in addition to its exploration of the civil rights movement of which Rustin was a significant part, includes guidelines on facilitating conversations on LGBT issues, encountering and responding to homophobia in schools and communities, and the use of art and media to create social change.⁴²

The ADL, cognizant of the power of a recognizable figure as students grapple with difficult subject matter, published a lesson entitled "Caitlyn Jenner and the Power of Coming Out" following her appearance on *20/20* in 2015. This lesson, part of the ADL's "Current Events Classroom," identified a meaningful, teachable moment in the struggle and bravery of an internationally famous Olympic athlete and pop culture figure and used students' knowledge of Caitlyn Jenner and her family as an example. The lesson explores the coming out process and political and societal reactions to it as well as highlighting Jenner's coming out as transgender and the meaning behind that term.⁴³ The national fascination with Caitlyn Jenner and her journey brought transgender issues to the forefront of national consciousness and, more than other figures, began to reduce the stigma attached to it. This, then, was a wise lesson choice for an organization devoted to eliminating discrimination.

Historical context offers students a foundation from which to better understand lessons that focus on human rights and address the ways in which abridging LGBTQ+ rights violates human rights. The Human Rights Resource Center developed activities on the ways in which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights encompasses gay rights, issues of tolerance in democracy, equality, and rights abuses around the world. Its lessons rely upon this declaration and other laws and statutes created to eradicate discrimination and inequality and ask students to compare the promises in that document with LGBT rights as of 2000.⁴⁴ The ADL's "In-Group, Out-Group: The Exclusion of LGBT People

from Societal Institutions” investigates the inclusion and exclusion of certain groups in public life and the role of fear and prejudice in this ostracism. The goal of the lesson, ultimately, is for students to “increase their awareness about the ways in which LGBT people are currently included/excluded from societal institutions.”⁴⁵ In all of these lessons, information about the past and the impact of the past on the present is significant to the learning objectives. Ultimately, though, raising students’ awareness and inspiring consideration of how to improve the present takes priority over in-depth studies of the past. Including current events in social studies classes is an essential aspect of student learning. Illustrating connections between the past and the present enables students to grasp the relevance of historical events, engages them in the subject in more meaningful ways, and enhances their ability to synthesize information. A strong foundation in events of the past, though, is necessary to these higher order learning goals. For students to join the conversation on LGBTQ+ issues and begin to address them they need social studies’ citizenship-driven goals and a strong historical foundation.

Including history in lessons that serve civics-related objectives acknowledges the power of historical learning to create change. Organizations need to push that idea further and embrace history, and the social studies classes where it is taught, as the force for change it can be.

With studies continuing to find and evidence mounting to confirm that LGBTQ+ students face hostility, discrimination, and bullying on a daily basis, it is imperative to increase young people’s awareness of the LGBTQ+ population, their contributions to society, and the struggles they endure in and outside of school buildings in addition to giving them the tools to create a better community. Moreover, with national issues pertaining to the treatment and status of LGBTQ+ individuals—and the violence that this group historically and currently suffers—consistently present across all forms of media, multiple opportunities for students to consider, discuss, and evaluate these issues are essential and timely. History, however, also remains important, and the fact that resources position history as a conversation starter rather than offering students more profound opportunities to study LGBTQ+ history diminishes their chance to understand the issues and circumstances that these materials attempt to address. Positioning history in the service of seemingly larger goals suppresses its importance, both in terms of students’ knowledge of LGBTQ+ history and regarding the status of the subject matter in general.

Harassment, bullying, and violence need to be addressed and eradicated, but this does not preclude the need for, or make these issues exclusive from,

historical learning that can serve the same objectives and yield the same results for LGBTQ+ students and their classmates. Social studies teaches skills essential for academic success and twenty-first-century citizenship: critical thinking, evaluating sources, argumentation, analyzing multiple perspectives, and civic participation, to name a few. Building students' competency in these areas can ameliorate hostile situations and improve the climate and atmosphere for marginalized groups, in this case, a school's LGBTQ+ population. Social studies is vital to achieving anti-bullying goals, as is the historical education that comprises a significant part of students' experience with this subject. History provides the content knowledge students need to make social studies skills more meaningful and truly create the informed citizenry to which the discipline aspires.

* * *

Lessons and resources aiming to change and improve school climate—materials that emphasize, prioritize, and encourage students to speak about their own experiences and opinions—far outnumber those providing comprehensive portrayals and analyses of LGBTQ+ history. The two are not, however, and should not be treated as, mutually exclusive. Good history lessons, even those that don't explicitly ask students to apply what they learn to the present, inevitably awaken deeper consideration of students' lives and surroundings. This idea extends beyond LGBTQ+ history; lessons on slavery and civil rights, for example, if done well, should inspire students to ponder race relations in the twenty-first century. Similarly, the underlying goal of anti-bullying and climate-focused lessons parallels calls for ending harassment that students might learn about in their history and social studies classes, though this concept is more obtuse due to the relative lack of LGBTQ+ history in most students' school experience. Recognizing this overlap, then, and developing curricula that address multiple purposes and acknowledge the intrinsic link between a profound understanding of the past and positive change in the present, can fulfill and align with anti-bullying and social studies missions.