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Compelled to Act: Teachers Who Include LGBTQ+ History

LGBTQ+-inclusive history, which enjoys growing but limited support from state governments and departments of education, is, for the most part, a grassroots, self-motivated endeavor. It is not yet a fixture in high school US history classes throughout the country, despite educators' and activists' work to make it so. It is not included in most states' standards or exams. Resources are available online for teachers who seek to incorporate this material,¹ but teachers must be inclined to search for it and know that it exists at all. It is, according to teachers and scholars, a subject with which many teachers have little to no experience; therefore, in many cases, this material is unconsciously omitted.² Among teachers who know this history, there are various reasons—including, in five states, laws prohibiting its mention³—that they do not include it.⁴ There is, however, an embryonic movement to change this. A small number of high school social studies teachers do incorporate LGBTQ+ history and have a strong rationale for doing so. These teachers, though a minority now, believe they have the power to influence others and affect change among their students, schools, and communities.

It is impossible to explore what is happening in classrooms without talking to teachers. The twelve⁵ teachers included represent different regions and their careers span decades (see Figure 8.1).⁶ Eleven are from more liberal regions where one might expect LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum to be considered acceptable: seven teach or taught in and around Los Angeles and San Francisco, California, from 1990 to the present; one taught in New York City from 2012 to 2015; one is a current teacher in northern New Jersey with more than a decade of experience; one taught in Portland, Oregon, for twelve years; a Chicago educator, currently working with students and with other teachers, has been working in education for nearly twenty years; and a rural Colorado teacher began her career in 2012. Five of the teachers are no longer in the classroom, though they are still professionally involved in education in some capacity; the seven who currently

NAME	CITY/REGION	YEARS TEACHING	LGBTQ+
Courtney Anderson	New York, NY Bay Area, CA	2009–14 2014–present	No
Danny M. Cohen	Chicago, IL	2014–present	Yes
Olivia Cole	Los Angeles, CA	2013–present	Yes
Fred Fox	Portland, OR	2006–present	Yes
Mitchell James	Northern New Jersey	2006–present	No
Hasmig Minassian	Bay Area, CA	2001–present	Yes
Felicia Perez	Los Angeles, CA	2000–10 2010–12	Yes
Dana Rosenberg	Bay Area, CA	1995–2008	Yes
Lyndsey Schlax	San Francisco, CA	2008–18	No
Will Scott	Los Angeles, CA San Francisco, CA	1990–98	Yes
Casey Sinclair	Brooklyn, NY	2012–15	Yes
Melanie Wells	Rural Colorado	2012–present	No

Figure 8.1 Participating teachers. List of teachers participating in this study, including location, years taught, and LGBTQ+ identity.

teach have been doing so for anywhere between seven and nineteen years. Eight of the teachers identify as LGBTQ+—five are lesbians and three are gay males; the others are heterosexual but sympathetic to LGBTQ+ issues and causes.

Unlike topics specifically addressed in state and national standards—those that students may be tested on at the end of the school year—teachers make a specific and conscious choice to include LGBTQ+ history in their US history classes. For some teachers there seems to be no choice at all; they identify as LGBTQ+ and believe that this often omitted history deserves to be included in the classes they teach.⁷ For others, historical instruction is incomplete if it is not fully inclusive.⁸ All of the teachers here, when asked, have direct and specific reasons for bringing LGBTQ+ history into their classes and, for each, the rationale derives from their own education and upbringing. LGBTQ+-inclusive history curriculum is not a niche field specific to teachers who identify as such and therefore seek to convey their own history; it is an endeavor undertaken by

teachers who, through personal experiences and realizations, believe there are holes in traditional historical education that need to be filled. Though the work these teachers do is first and foremost to enrich their students' lives, they also recognize that, in teaching this history, they are doing something important and uncommon. In fact, all twelve stated that they never learned LGBTQ+ history in their K–12 education, regardless of their age or location. These teachers were excited that their stories would be told, and hope that their dedication to integration might influence others' practices, as well.

The Seeds: Teachers Who Incorporate LGBTQ+ History

While standards and curricula differ, students throughout the United States learn their country's history in a class devoted solely to that subject at least once, and often multiple times, during their academic careers. The material conveyed in those classes varies widely among states, districts, schools, and teachers; these decisions derive from internal and external sources and have the power to influence students' perception of history. US history teachers throughout the country, then, are faced with the decision of what to include—and omit—from the narrative they impart.

Many teachers, having never learned this material in their high school and college history classes, are not cognizant of leaving it out in their own classes;⁹ their omission results from apathy or ignorance rather than hostility. For the few that prioritize this history and its importance to their students' education, though, it can become an essential part of their curriculum with the power to have a significant impact on their students.

The Early Adopters

In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was extremely rare to enter a classroom in which LGBT history was mentioned. Nine teachers in this study attended and graduated from high schools all over the country during this time period; none of them learned this history, and several reported that references to LGBTQ+ issues were conspicuously absent from their school environments.¹⁰ Although Matthew Shepard's murder in 1998 raised awareness of the danger facing young people who identified as LGBT, the LGBTQ+ population and issues important to them were neither as frequently discussed nor as societally recognized as they would be ten years later.

Teachers who deemed this history important, then, were among a handful who integrated it into their classrooms.¹¹ Three teachers in this study, all of whom personally identify as LGBTQ+, implemented an inclusive curriculum at a time when few others did.

Dana Rosenberg taught from 1998 to 2008 at two different schools in Northern California. Rosenberg came into teaching with specific ideas about her role; as she stated, “I wanted school to be different than the way it was. ... My mission as a teacher was to disrupt.”¹² Rosenberg turned to teaching because she “felt passionately about changing the systems of schools and how kids learned.”¹³ As a queer person, those changes included bringing LGBTQ+ issues into her classroom. At her first school, Rosenberg’s students were middle and working class; of the two public high schools in town, according to Rosenberg, hers was “whiter with a bit more resources.”¹⁴ From 2005 to 2008 she taught at a Bay Area public alternative school focused on students pursuing their passions and working in the community. For Rosenberg, who considers herself “pretty political” and has been “out” her entire career, connecting with LGBTQ+ students and providing them with a safe space—including starting the school’s GSA—was an inevitable, and beneficial, aspect of her teaching experience. Rosenberg left the social studies classroom in 2009, transitioning into sex education and administration.

Felicia Perez began teaching after working as an activist for LGBTQ+ youth advocating for students’ right to establish a GSA at their school. Perez worked as a youth organizer for local and national organizations, including the ACLU, prior to entering the classroom. In that capacity, she worked with young people “teaching them information with regards to constitutional rights and amendment rights.”¹⁵ Guiding students through the process of understanding their rights and claiming their identity became part of her personal teaching philosophy. Similar to Rosenberg, Perez mentored students who identified as LGBTQ+, assisting those who struggled with their sexuality and identity. Unlike Rosenberg, from 1999 to 2012 Perez taught a largely Latinx and African American student population at two different schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) that had few resources. Perez was open about her sexuality from the start. Including queer people in her history lessons was organic to Perez, who believes that if the curriculum highlights individuals from some cultures and societies it should include individuals from all.

Will Scott, meanwhile, taught from 1992 to 1999. After working as a prison educator following college, he decided to bring his skill set into the classroom. Scott stated that he was “at the intersection of social justice orientation and the

desire to do ... social justice work”; his experience and that philosophy brought him into the classroom.¹⁶ As a gay, white, Canadian man teaching in an under-resourced Southern California school with a largely Latino and African American population in the early 1990s, it took time for Scott to find his voice and the confidence to insert the LGBT material he deemed necessary in the curriculum. Eventually, though, he recalled, “I began to feel that by checking parts of myself at the door, I was doing not only the queer kids in my classroom a disservice,” because, he said, “I failed to provide [non-queer students] opportunities to discuss issues.”¹⁷ After moving to San Francisco in his fourth year of teaching, Scott found himself in a more diverse environment in which he felt safer and more comfortable with all the facets of his own identity. At that point, Scott began teaching from a social justice perspective and incorporating LGBTQ+ history where it fit thematically, though he knew that doing so could lead to his firing. Scott posited, “I was the teacher with all of the power in deciding the curriculum, but in another sense, I was a stranger in the communities in which I was teaching, not by the end but certainly in the beginning.”¹⁸ Scott left the classroom in 1999 to work for a teacher training organization.

Rosenberg, Perez, and Scott all entered teaching intending to inspire and awaken their students’ consciences and guide them to use the history they learned as a springboard from which to think differently about the world. Their inclusion of LGBTQ+ history was especially radical at a time when, for many schools, establishing and attaining district support for a GSA was a significant struggle,¹⁹ and larger society often remained silent on LGBTQ+ issues.

A More Inclusive US History Survey

The US history curriculum, regardless of teacher, school, or geographic location, is constantly evolving and, frequently, a challenge for even those teachers with outstanding time management skills. Choosing to include one historical event or era can often lead to omitting another. Additionally, teachers have for years insisted that getting much farther than the Second World War or the 1960s is nearly impossible in the course of an academic year. Teachers who include LGBTQ+ history, then, make a conscious decision to do so.

Mitchell James, who does not identify as LGBTQ+, lives and teaches in Northern New Jersey where he said “LGBTQ+ rights and families and, increasingly, students who are transitioning seem to be more apparent.”²⁰ His school’s student body is ethnically diverse and evenly split between male and female students. James began teaching in 2006, immediately after completing

his master's; the open-minded philosophy and atmosphere of his school are, except for a brief stint student teaching, the only working conditions he's ever known. James has never been instructed to teach LGBTQ+ history, nor has he met opposition for doing so. He stated, "I felt fairly comfortable from the get go to teach topics that might be a little hands-off in other places."²¹ James started incorporating LGBTQ+ history in his US history classes in his second or third year. While he could and would like to include more, his incorporation of LGBTQ+ history in his class "stems from the fact that [he] thinks it's something that needs to be taught."²²

Melanie Wells began teaching in 2012 in rural Colorado; after encountering ineffective history teachers in her own schooling, she was determined to do and be better for her students. Considering this motivation, she asserted, "I wonder if there are some kind of connections between not having great origin stories and being willing to experiment a little bit more in service of the kids on the margins that need to be drawn in a little more."²³ Wells does not identify as LGBTQ+ and teaches in a conservative, predominantly white Colorado town that she compared to "a 1950s, 'Pleasantville,' 'Leave it to Beaver' style town."²⁴ According to Wells, her school is "a little slow to adopt other things," including progressive resources and curricula.²⁵ Teaching LGBTQ+ history is important to Wells because, she believes, it is an issue that resonates with students who need a place in which this history can be discussed and the language around it normalized. Despite the conservative atmosphere in the town where she teaches, Wells believes that her LGBTQ+ students need to see themselves in the history they learn.²⁶

Wells and James include LGBTQ+ history in their Advanced Placement US History classes; both did so even before the College Board included a clause about gay rights in its Framework in 2014. They see this history as too important to exclude on an intellectual level, and relevant to their students' lives. Olivia Cole, who also infuses her US history classes with LGBTQ+ history, does so in a self-contained special education classroom. Moreover, Cole stated, "As a gay woman I already [felt] tied to the subject."²⁷ Cole claimed that LAUSD, where she's taught since 2012, supports teachers of all genders and sexualities.²⁸ She began focusing on curriculum, including LGBTQ+ history, in her second year after conquering significant classroom management challenges in her first year. The environment at her school and the freedom it allows, coupled with the relationship Cole is now able to cultivate with her students, create a space open to teaching LGBTQ+ history and helping students question the information they receive from other sources.

Courtney Anderson and Hasmig Minassian, who teach at the same Bay Area school, come from distinctly different backgrounds. Both women, though, believe it is essential to include LGBTQ+ history in their classes. Anderson, who does not identify as LGBTQ+, grew up “white, upper middle class, and privileged in Southern California.” She began her teaching career at the age of twenty-two at a small New York City high school, where she taught from 2009 to 2014; she characterized it as an “openly LGBT friendly school” which, she stated, “was a big part of why we decided to be more inclusive with our curriculum.”²⁹ Though the Bay Area school is, in her estimation, more traditional, she also said that “teachers have a lot of agency in their classrooms” and are “given the benefit of the doubt” when they want to try something new.³⁰ Anderson stated that, as a white person who was born in the United States, she always learned her history and, as a teacher, it is imperative that her students feel connected to the history they learn. As she said, “I firmly believe that history should reflect the community that you’re a part of.”³¹

Minassian, the daughter of Armenian immigrants who does identify as LGBTQ+, prioritizes normalizing LGBTQ+ figures and lives throughout history; she contended that the “bubble” in which she teaches is essential to her doing so. Though she did not immediately begin teaching LGBTQ+ history in her US history classes—she reported that she was “hesitant to teach it in her early years,” felt vulnerable, and was worried she would be “accused of including this information because she was gay”—as she gained confidence as a teacher, she began to incorporate LGBTQ+ history in increasing amounts in the lessons that she teaches.³²

Focus on LGBTQ+ History

Some teachers, like those aforementioned, include this history when and where they can in their existing US history classes. For others with the resources, freedom, and support, classes devoted to LGBTQ+ history are the answer. Although such courses are rare, they offer students an opportunity for in-depth learning on a topic that they often do not encounter in other classes. Scholars and the teachers in this study argue that LGBTQ+ history should be incorporated into US history surveys; while LGBTQ+ history is omitted from or remains peripheral in survey classes, specialized electives, and their ability to convey information excluded from other courses at the same school, serve as an entry point for inclusivity.

Lyndsey Schlax began teaching her elective on LGBTQ+ history in the fall of 2015 at an arts-focused high school in San Francisco; she began teaching seven years prior after three years as a paraeducator in various settings. Schlax, who does not identify as LGBTQ+, was asked by the district to create and teach a new course aligned with the FAIR Act. Though she focused on “undertold” histories prior to teaching her LGBTQ+ history elective, she did not specifically integrate LGBTQ+ history. Schlax’s students at this specialized high school came from middle- to upper-middle-class homes with educated parents. The student body is diverse; it reflects the city, but it is whiter than other schools in the district.³³ Students in grades nine through twelve can take the LGBTQ+ history elective as a supplement to required history courses. With little previous exposure to this material, Schlax had to research and learn it in order to teach it.

Fred Fox likewise taught an elective on queer history at his public high school in Portland, Oregon, a city that he described as a “relatively liberal, progressive community.”³⁴ Fox began teaching in 2005 after twelve years in the army. Fox, who is gay, recalled, “In hindsight I went into the army to not be gay and I thought it would fix me ... it wasn’t an environment where you could be gay.”³⁵ His army career spanned the post-Cold War and War on Terror eras; it also coincided with Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. Fox, then, is an intrinsic part of the history that he teaches. His school’s student body was predominantly white, middle to upper class, and evenly split between males and females. According to Fox there was a small, open LGBTQ+ population among the students. Fox proposed his course in order to introduce these, and all, students to an underrepresented aspect of US history—one that, as a gay man, he never had the opportunity to learn—and was surprised in his research phase by how few history-centered resources he found. Fox therefore designed a class that translated college-level queer studies into a course accessible to high school students.

At an elective-based school in Brooklyn, students choose their own social studies courses. Survey courses, like those offered at more traditional high schools, are not part of the curriculum; students complete rigorous portfolio assessments rather than taking state tests. According to Casey Sinclair, who taught there from 2012 to 2015, the school’s philosophy echoed her own: courses are often designed with students’ requests in mind and respond to the direction in which students take them. Sinclair’s classes on LGBTQ+ history and contemporary LGBTQ+ issues came from and followed this model. She recalled, “The LGBTQ+ curriculum had already been developed by a colleague and friend of mine” and, Sinclair said, “was a huge piece of where I fit in. I was really excited about teaching this material.”³⁶ For Sinclair, this represented a relevant

lens through which to teach US and New York history. Additionally, she was compelled by the idea that students would “see and learn and hear stories they don’t get to hear and learn about ... a whole part of their history and their life that they don’t get to explore with other people in our collegial and academic environment.”³⁷

US History beyond the Classroom

A growing number of organizations outside the classroom now exist to fill the void and bring this information to students at different schools all over the country and educate teachers so that they can do the same.³⁸ Unsilence, a Chicago-based organization founded in 2014 by Danny M. Cohen, runs programs with young people in which they discuss the “hidden stories of human rights and ... different modes of silencing.”³⁹ Unsilence emerged from Cohen’s long standing goal to “create educational experiences, learning experiences” and the curriculum he built and introduced to teachers in order to make that happen. The programs pay particular attention to the atrocities endured by homosexuals during the Holocaust. Though many students are familiar with Holocaust history, Unsilence focuses on a group of victims denied recognition for decades after the war. Representatives from Unsilence, including Cohen, run workshops in schools in which they reveal, teach, and engage students in discussions of this information. They conduct similar workshops with educators and public programs in states across the country to share their resources and provide comprehensive Holocaust education.

This diverse group of teachers, despite their differences, shares a dedication to teaching LGBTQ+ history. Doing so was/is easier for some than others, and their differences are a large part of the stories they tell. Ultimately, in their approach to teaching LGBTQ+ history, their similarities transcend their differences in meaningful ways.

Helping It Grow: The Motivation behind Teaching LGBTQ+-Inclusive History

The aforementioned teachers are among a minority nationwide incorporating LGBTQ+ history into their classes. The seven California teachers live and teach in the one of six states in the country that mandate LGBTQ+-inclusive history education; the most recent History and Social Science Framework dictates that

colleagues in their schools and throughout the state join them in this endeavor, though many California teachers are still learning about how to implement this act. The others are part of the same grassroots movement; Mitchell James, Melanie Wells, and Danny M. Cohen also teach in states that now mandate LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum. For all of these teachers, then, developing and teaching LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula is an intentional and willful act motivated by pedagogical, historical, political, and personal reasons that compel them to impart this information to their students (see Figure 8.2).

History as a Mirror

Some students, over the course of a school year, encounter a wealth of opportunities to see themselves or people “like” them in history, others less so. This dichotomy compelled Courtney Anderson to incorporate LGBTQ+ history in her teaching; because, she said, “I can’t imagine being in a history class and feeling zero connection to what we’re learning.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Melanie Wells is motivated to expose her students to new perspectives on historical eras “so that the kids in my room who are LGBT have something where they recognize themselves in history.”⁴¹ Though Anderson and Wells teach in very different schools and communities, both are cognizant of the diversity within their classes and the need to consider it in curriculum planning. Their devotion to teaching LGBTQ+ history stems from a belief that students of every ethnicity, class, and gender need to see themselves in history. For them, including this material is one component of a larger desire for representation.

Anderson’s desire for her students to see themselves in history derives from a personal academic history in which she was able to do just that. The opposite was true for Dana Rosenberg, whose impetus to teach LGBTQ+ history partly resulted from “holes in her own education.” She asserted, “I was motivated in particular by students who were gay and lesbian ... who were terrified just to be in the world. They never felt like their experience was validated through a textbook or through the curriculum. ... I wanted them to see that history can be about them, too.”⁴² Having experienced history education that didn’t reflect her identity and experiences, Rosenberg worked to ensure that her students experienced history differently. For her, righting the wrongs of the past determined her practice.

Fred Fox believes that while improving school climate is important work, it is not all that students need in order to feel safe. Fox was surprised when he began searching for resources for his course and found few focused on historical events,

Figure 8.2 Motivation. Teacher reported motivation for including LGBTQ+ history. Note that each of the teachers reported more than one reason for including this history in their class. Each is discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

trends, and figures. As he said, “I found tons and tons of stuff about creating a safe space, and to support a classroom ... but not a lot about how to actually have students see themselves in a curriculum ... which is equally as important as just feeling safe.”⁴³ Casey Sinclair similarly claimed that the connections that students make when they learn this history, a rare opportunity in an educational setting, are an important aspect of the school experience.⁴⁴ Many students’ identities are complex, and it is essential that they see the important parts of themselves—especially those that might be frequently ignored or unacknowledged—in the history they learn. Thus, educators express, teaching LGBTQ+ history is integral to students connecting with classroom material, understanding who they are, and contextualizing others’ experiences.

Reverse the Pattern of Omission

Beyond the desire for students to identify with the historical figures and events about which they learn, it is essential to several of these teachers that the history they teach is as complete as possible and free of the holes and omissions many of them noticed as students and in the resources at their disposal. None of the teachers interviewed for this study learned or heard mention of LGBTQ+ history in their own schooling (see Figure 8.3), an omission that left an indelible impression. A United States history course, for these teachers, is not complete if it fails to include the stories of every group.

LGBTQ+ history and individuals’ contributions are less frequently acknowledged than military history, foreign policy, and other groups’ struggles for equal rights at the K–12 level in a broad study of US history. Students may speculate on historical figures’ identities, but discussion often goes no farther than that. Lyndsey Schlax, whose semester-long elective covered this material in depth, contended that not teaching LGBTQ+ history simply perpetuates this invisibility. She cites teachers’ lack of knowledge as the cause of this omission; she believes it speaks to the need to remedy the lack of information conveyed to students.⁴⁵ Fred Fox, who, despite his own lived history, also had to learn the material before teaching his elective, contends that it is important to teach this history now so that future generations do not encounter the same ignorance as students in the past.⁴⁶ In states outside those with “No Promo Homo” laws the omission of LGBTQ+ history—as Schlax and Fox would testify—is much more a factor of apathy or ignorance than outright resistance. Reversing this trend, then, might change the way history is taught in the future.

Figure 8.3 Teachers' background with LGBTQ+ history

Casey Sinclair, whose LGBT history course came about based on student requests, stated,

It's not only that it was important to them because they get to see and learn and hear stories that they don't otherwise get to hear and learn about but also because it's really interesting, and it's like a whole part of their history and their life that they don't get to explore with other people in our collegial and academic environment.⁴⁷

Danny M. Cohen, the founder of Unsilence, similarly believes that giving voice to these untold stories can be transformative for students and deepen their understanding of history. Moreover, according to Cohen, introducing topics through a historical lens provides students with a safe space in which to discuss potentially controversial topics due to the intellectual distance students place between themselves and the subject matter.⁴⁸ Learning history, then, is an important first step to conceptualizing and engaging with more current events.

A Thirst for Knowledge

High school students in the twenty-first century encounter discussions of LGBTQ+ issues in their daily lives. Perception and coverage of these matters

varies, but news outlets across the political spectrum pontificate and social media debates rage on topics like transgender rights and depictions of gender identity and sexuality in movies and on television. As Melanie Wells stated, “My kids care about contemporary LGBT issues and ... that is one of the things that they have very strong opinions on ... that’s one of these things that kids are very interested in and wish to know more about.”⁴⁹ As students form their own ideas about the present, then, it is important for and to them to learn about the past.

Additionally, many young people are naturally curious and, when given the opportunity, will seek to learn about topics with which they are unfamiliar. Courtney Anderson recounted that 20 percent to 30 percent of her students chose to focus on LGBT history when given the option to do so for an end of year research project. As she said, “some [chose it] because they identified with it, some because they thought that they identified with it and wanted to explore that more, and others just because they’re like, ‘Well, I’ve never learned this and I want to learn more.’”⁵⁰ Sinclair similarly reported that students became immersed in the LGBTQ+ history that she taught.⁵¹ For teachers with experience teaching LGBTQ+ history, their students’ thirst for knowledge on this topic is remarkable. History can be repetitious for students required to take US history courses in several grades. The opportunity to break the monotony is, therefore, intriguing. The infrequency with which most students are introduced to these topics in a meaningful way makes the moments when they are even more eye opening.

The Demands of a Changing Society

Teachers claimed that the increasing presence of LGBTQ+ figures and attention to LGBTQ+-related issues in the media and across society demands the inclusion of LGBTQ+ history in their classes. It is social studies teachers’ job to encourage civic mindedness; integrating the information necessary to do so is, for these teachers, imperative.

Mitchell James’s motivation derived from the changes he saw in his environment. Though neither parents nor administrators specifically requested that he include LGBTQ+ history, he found changing attitudes and norms compelling. James recounted, “We are living in a more open society where students are, I can honestly say a lot more comfortable coming out now at least from my own interpretation even when I was in high school.”⁵² Courtney Anderson, too, cited acceptance and diversity among students as one reason that LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum is important to her. Of her school in the Bay

Area, Anderson stated, the population “is incredibly open in terms of sexuality and gender” though there are many students who do not yet understand that gender is a spectrum and not a binary. This openness, however, “makes it a lot easier for [teachers] to continue to insert things and just try things out.”⁵³ As James said, school and societal changes spurred him to act; he declared, “So my inclusion actually, I think, largely stems from the fact that I think it’s something that needs to be taught. Not necessarily something that needs to be mandated from somebody else.”⁵⁴

Dana Rosenberg asserted that the way in which students learn history must reflect the society in which they live if progress is to be sustained.⁵⁵ As Felicia Perez contended,

every day is something new that eventually you’re going to have to teach if you stay in the profession long enough, but what that also means is there are definitely opportunities in looking back to see like, “What did we miss? What wasn’t talked about in history like in terms of queer history? Who wasn’t there and mentioned or who was there and wasn’t mentioned?”⁵⁶

In the same vein, Mitchell James, Will Scott, and Danny M. Cohen all discussed the need to educate students on LGBTQ+ issues in the Trump era when the rights secured by and for that population were under governmental attack;⁵⁷ national and international events, including shifts in power, necessarily impact the course of history and the way in which it is conveyed.

Political Motivation

Introducing students to subject matter that some might consider controversial, too mature, or simply unnecessary is, in and of itself, a political act. Most of the teachers interviewed teach in schools and communities where the decision to teach this history is accepted, if not wholeheartedly supported. For some the decision to introduce this material can be especially fraught. Under any circumstances, it is difficult to discuss teaching LGBTQ+ history without discussing the political motivation and/or implications in doing so.

To Fred Fox, teaching LGBTQ+ history was another step toward “chipping away at the lack of diversity in [the] curriculum,” something he believed was important but others in his department resisted. Fox stated that, in his opinion, he received approval for his queer history course because of where he lives and previously offered courses focused on other marginalized groups. As he asserted, “if this was the first non-normative history class being offered, I don’t think

it would slide.”⁵⁸ Lyndsey Schlax’s personal interest in politics and grassroots revolution made the prospect of teaching LGBTQ+ history enticing; she took the opportunity to combine her own interests with what she believed was important and largely unknown subject matter and created a class that would open students to history they otherwise might never have discovered.⁵⁹

Teachers who view their profession as inherently political, especially when they identify as LGBTQ+, have multiple motives for teaching this history. When Dana Rosenberg pursued her degree at a small women’s liberal arts college, she subscribed to the institution’s edict of teaching as a political act. Teaching this history in the late 1990s was overtly political. She came into teaching determined to teach LGBTQ+ history and change LGBTQ+ students’ lives and found ways to implement her ideas. Felicia Perez believes that people in positions of power—specifically, in this case, teachers—have a responsibility to act as role models for their students. She stated,

Being out in the classroom is just as important, has just as much of an effect and a massive impact as seeing a gay character on TV, as seeing a gay character in cartoons, in books. There’s the exact same impact and that you’re seeing a teacher, somebody who is a person of knowledge ... teaching you something and exposing you to something and as an authority figure, and someone that you might admire and even look up to or even somebody that you might seek out for help and guidance is somebody who is queer.⁶⁰

Becoming a role model, empowering students, giving them a safe space, and providing them with knowledge were essential aspects of teaching to Perez, who carried her activist background into her classroom. When learning translates into students having a voice, education becomes political.

Steps toward Normalcy

Nationwide, teachers who incorporate LGBTQ+ history into their courses are in the minority. Among the teachers interviewed, many reported that their decision to teach this material was their own and not something that was a priority (or, in some cases, acceptable) for their colleagues or the district. Those who do teach this history, though, echo scholars’ findings calling for an end to “othering.”⁶¹ Part of their motivation in teaching inclusive curriculum is to normalize the history and experience of being LGBTQ+ in the United States.

Hasmig Minassian believes that LGBTQ+ figures and events should be “folded in” to the curriculum in the same way as other groups and individuals and that

they should be discussed in a “normal, non-sexual way just like anyone else.” Minassian espoused that something as simple as “changing the language, which seems like it’s something that is so basic ... would be so meaningful to day-to-day life.”⁶² Full integration can accomplish that goal. Melanie Wells, who teaches in a more conservative environment in rural Colorado, focuses on reducing stigma and increasing acceptance through LGBTQ+ history. As she contended, “the thing I can do is at least normalize it and make it seem like it’s not as big a deal as it might be.” Wells attempts to capture her students’ passion and teach about things that are important in their world. By making those subjects more accessible, she posited, they become more relevant, more memorable, and more openly discussed.⁶³ In Los Angeles, meanwhile, Olivia Cole teaches in a school that supports “tak[ing] the mystery out” of LGBTQ+ history and lifestyles.⁶⁴ Omitting this history reinforces the idea that the LGBTQ+ population is different or less important than groups that are more prominent in the US history curriculum: when students grow accustomed to not hearing about something it becomes “other” or abnormal. Teaching this history, and making it as much a part of the curriculum as the Civil War and the Progressive Era, can reverse that trend and accomplish the goal of removing the mystery.

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Querying and assessing why teachers believe it is important to teach LGBTQ+ history is significant to this practice becoming more widespread. Inclusive curriculum cannot be—or be perceived as being—a niche filled only by LGBTQ+ teachers and tailored to or only meaningful for LGBTQ+ students; it must appeal to many different groups and enhance learning experiences regardless of how a student identifies. Evaluating teachers’ different reasons and goals, then, makes it clear that teaching LGBTQ+ history is not narrow in scope and intention and that a diverse group of teachers believe it is necessary for all students’ historical learning and participation in twenty-first-century society. These voices, and the diversity among them, lay the foundation for more widespread support of this endeavor; only by building this support among teachers and within the institutions that govern and determine educational policy and standards in the states and the national government will this grassroots movement grow.