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Introduction

In September 2012 *How to Survive a Plague*, David France's Academy Award-nominated documentary on the AIDS crisis and the rise and fracture of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP),¹ premiered in theaters. The film, which incorporates amateur video and television clips from the 1980s as well as interviews with key figures, comprehensively chronicles the AIDS epidemic and the government's response to it. It also illustrates the ways in which members of ACT UP implemented tactics used by activists in other social movements in their own struggle for acceptance, recognition, and to have their needs met. France hoped that educational institutions would use his work to instruct students on the history of the AIDS crisis, the activism it generated, and, more generally, the struggle for LGBTQ+² rights in the United States. Yet, almost everyone he consulted—including some of the most forward-thinking people in the field—insisted that high school history classes were the wrong place for such sensitive and controversial material and that none would consider his request.³

France, though, was persistent. As a filmmaker with no background in education, he stated honestly that he had “no idea” how teachers might use his film in their classrooms. He strongly believed that it was important to expose students to the history of the AIDS crisis, in general, and ACT UP, specifically, because though it accomplished major change it does not receive the same recognition as other movements.⁴ Ultimately, in 2013, France approached Robert Cohen at New York University. Unlike other educators with whom France consulted, Cohen saw the possibilities inherent in using *How to Survive a Plague* in high school classes given the proper historical contextualization; he agreed that incorporating the AIDS crisis in the US history curriculum was imperative.⁵ Cohen is an expert in social reform movements, especially those led by young people;⁶ by 2013 he began advocating for greater attention to the gay rights movement, and LGBTQ+ history more generally, in high school classrooms. He proved a perfect ally for France at a time when France heard only a chorus of “no’s.”

France and Cohen, a filmmaker and a university professor, could not themselves defy convention and naysayers to bring *How to Survive a Plague* into high school classrooms. To do so they required a pedagogical partner with high school teaching experience. At that point, I entered the equation. As a researcher studying the challenges in incorporating LGBTQ+ history, I understood the obstacles France faced. Moreover, with ten years of high school teaching experience, I knew how to create a unit that could impart important information about the AIDS crisis, how the atmosphere in the United States in the 1980s contributed to the epidemic, and the need for activism around it. Students participating in this curriculum learned about the discovery and spread of AIDS as well as the origins and leading figures of ACT UP, including the way in which the lack of recognition and response on the part of the government, corporations, and the pharmaceutical community compelled people with AIDS to advocate on their own behalf for treatment options and anti-discrimination legislation.⁷ Students also learned to identify how ACT UP built upon the strategies and tactics of other twentieth-century reform movements as well as the ways in which this organization was a product of its time; an essential part of this unit was eliciting these comparisons from students in a way that demonstrated the connection between various eras in US history. *How to Survive a Plague* was a major influence in the design and trajectory of the unit and its centerpiece; excerpts were used in conjunction with and to add context and significance to other sources and events. The students, seniors in high school, knew little about AIDS; most recalled discussing it briefly in a health class at some point in their schooling, if at all. Learning this history, then—as David France espoused from the start—was necessary and instructive.

France wanted high school students to see and learn from his film. Once that happened, he also wanted other teachers to learn about and from the curriculum I created and implemented so that more students might participate in that experience. Thus, after teaching and evaluating the lessons and the work students produced, I presented at the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Annual Conference. The NCSS presentation was only moderately attended; the majority of the audience saw the film previously and sought information on how they might use it in their classrooms. This supported France's idea that it had value for that purpose; these teachers believed the film was suitable but needed support to better grasp how to introduce it to their students. Other conference participants, though, questioned the film's appropriateness and whether there was actually a need to bring LGBTQ+ history into a US history class; a few made crude remarks when informed of my session topic. Though the unit and the film

were well received by the students in the classes I taught and their final writing assignments demonstrated increased knowledge and understanding, it was not widely recognized or adopted as France hoped. In 2014 at one of the country's largest and most prominent conferences for social studies teachers, LGBTQ+-inclusive history curriculum was not yet widely or systemically supported.

The obstacles David France faced, the tenacity required to get his film into high school classrooms, and other teachers' lack of enthusiasm are indicative of the broader paradox surrounding the inclusion of LGBTQ+ history in high school US history classes. There are advocates, teachers, administrators, families, elected officials, and organizations that support and encourage this practice and work to ensure that LGBTQ+ history has a place in the taught curriculum. There is, however, also significant resistance to its inclusion, due to religious convictions, reticence to change, bureaucratic barriers, or apathy. Therefore, its consistent inclusion is rare relative to other topics and events. It is often by fortuitously happening upon a feasible scenario that this information is conveyed to students in a meaningful way. As France and others' experiences demonstrate, with institutional and/or systemic support LGBTQ+-inclusive history curriculum can succeed, but one has to first find and capitalize on that support for this possibility to exist.

How to Survive a Plague offers viewers a window on an essential moment in US history, but its controversial subject matter stymied its director's efforts to bring it to high school audiences. France's experience encapsulates the fraught climate that exists around introducing LGBTQ+ issues in US history classes, bundling the difficulties inherent to curriculum reform, the perpetually raging culture wars, and the profound concerns about embracing education as the next major issue in an increasingly successful LGBTQ+ rights movement. In an era when educators have started to reconsider the narrative that history classes convey, it is essential that LGBTQ+ history is part of that conversation.

LGBTQ+ Rights in the Twenty-First Century

In the 2015 case *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage constitutional, handing the gay rights movement a significant and hard-fought victory. That evening, rainbow lights illuminated the White House in honor of this landmark decision. Marriage rights were not among the gay rights movement's original goals. In his 2005 book *Why Marriage?*, historian George Chauncey asserted that demands for marriage emerged from "two

searing experiences of the 1980s that forever impressed upon lesbians and gay men the importance of securing their relationships: the devastating impact of AIDS and the astonishingly rapid appearance of what everyone soon called the lesbian baby boom.”⁸ At first, the battle over same-sex marriage happened at the state level; Vermont’s civil union law in 2000 and Massachusetts’s law allowing same-sex marriages in 2004 touched off debates and advocacy in several other states, most notably California’s battle over Proposition 8.⁹ *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), which repealed state laws prohibiting same-sex marriage and the federal Defense of Marriage Act (1996), was thus a legal, moral, and personal victory for the LGBTQ+ community and its allies. In June 2015, the Supreme Court’s decision seemed to represent a turning point for LGBTQ+ rights in the United States and corresponded with public opinion that supported this step toward equality for the nation’s LGBTQ+ population: according to an ongoing Pew Research Center study, 55 percent of Americans supported same-sex marriage in 2015; 60 percent of Americans queried for a Gallup poll on the same topic responded favorably.¹⁰

Legalizing same-sex marriage was a significant accomplishment for the LGBTQ+ rights movement, but certainly not its only one. Since the start of the twenty-first century, the movement has achieved meaningful legal victories, with laws and statutes that limited and/or discriminated against the LGBTQ+ population overturned or deemed unconstitutional. In 2003, for example, the Supreme Court struck down Texas’s anti-sodomy laws in *Lawrence v. Texas*, ruling, “The Texas statute furthers no legitimate state interest which can justify its intrusion into the personal and private life of the individual.”¹¹ In 2010, meanwhile, Congress repealed Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, a Clinton-era policy stating that gay and lesbian individuals could serve in the military provided they didn’t reveal their sexuality; signing this repeal into law fulfilled a goal for which President Obama campaigned. Furthermore, Obama became the first president to reference the Stonewall riots in an inaugural address, declaring in 2013, “We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths—that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall.”¹² In later election cycles, Colorado elected the nation’s first gay governor, Jared Polis, in 2018, and former South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg became a significant player in the Democratic Party with his presidential run in 2020. The Supreme Court, meanwhile, ruled that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act protected LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination in *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020). Despite this political progress and, concurrently, emerging scholarship asserting the

benefits of including LGBTQ+ history in social studies classes, history was being made but not taught outside the more liberal regions of the country.

Though many Americans celebrated these accomplishments, others opposed them. As the LGBTQ+ community became more prominent in the United States, new laws attempting to limit this population's rights—many targeting transgender individuals—began to emerge. In March 2016, North Carolina passed the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act,¹³ which immediately drew the ire of LGBTQ+ activists, human rights groups, politicians from other parts of the country, celebrities, and allies of the LGBTQ+ community. The law, which “ban[ned] individuals from using public bathrooms that d[id] not correspond to their biological sex,” specifically targeted the transgender community and, opponents claimed, impeded individuals’ ability to live authentically.¹⁴ Similar bills were introduced, some successfully, in other parts of the country, and transgender bathrooms became an issue with which public facilities—including schools—across the nation contended. Moreover, the changing national atmosphere ushered in by the 2016 election led to a rise in public and political anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. An increased number of Americans vocally advocated for the Supreme Court to overturn its decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), a sentiment that gained momentum and legitimacy as the Court became more conservative; in June 2018, in fact, the Supreme Court ruled that Colorado’s Masterpiece Cakeshop could, on First Amendment grounds, deny service to a same-sex couple.¹⁵ In April 2019 the executive branch enacted a policy under which transgender military personnel “must use the uniforms, pronouns, and sleeping and bathroom facilities for their biological sex” and would be banned from service “if they have a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, a disorder in which a person’s gender identity does not match their physical gender at birth”;¹⁶ in a 5–4 ruling the Supreme Court upheld this “transgender ban.”¹⁷ Idaho passed the Fairness in Women’s Sports Act in April 2020, banning transgender girls and women from competing in interscholastic sports; a federal judge blocked the law four months later.¹⁸ Several other states, including Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi, likewise introduced and/or enacted laws banning transgender women from participating in sports.

Despite this increased attention and more frequent—and more virulent—debates about the LGBTQ+ community’s rights, the struggle to bring the historical information that would help Americans contextualize these matters into classrooms continues.¹⁹ Many Americans’ opinions are informed by influential figures and sources in their personal lives rather than facts and evidence. Individuals coming of age in the twenty-first century know little of the

extent to which this population was marginalized in prior decades or its efforts for recognition and equality. As LGBTQ+ rights and this population's societal status persist as one of several significant civil rights issues with which the United States grapples—Black Lives Matter protests in the spring and summer of 2020 called attention to the danger and violence Black transgender individuals, especially women, face—its absence from the majority of states' educational standards and resulting tenuous status in the social studies classroom leave students without the historical context to understand these political and cultural debates.

The Importance of LGBTQ+-inclusive Social Studies Classes

Several scholars argue that the purpose of social studies education is to create informed and engaged citizens who will participate in the democratic process.²⁰ Illustrating the many and varied ways in which national and international issues, past and present, relate to students' lives thus becomes central to the curriculum. As social studies scholar Stephen J. Thornton asserted, teachers are “gatekeepers” of information, making crucial determinations regarding the knowledge students receive.²¹ In a culturally sustaining social studies environment, that knowledge revolves around the recipients and serves as a lens through which students learn about themselves and their society. In the twenty-first century, therefore, if students are learning relevant history in their social studies classes current events indicate that the curriculum should include LGBTQ+ history.²²

The quest to create participatory citizens, an overarching goal of social studies education, focuses on teaching students how to apply information. Content is, therefore, a vital part of what happens in the classroom.²³ What students learn helps them come to terms with and hone their own notions and ideals; content is useful in that it offers students grounding and context for these thoughts and conceptions. Incorporating LGBTQ+ history, which has a direct bearing on the world in which students live, and instilling knowledge of that community's experiences and struggles can enable students to develop informed ideas and opinions about issues facing the LGBTQ+ population today so they can better participate in real world conversations.

It is impossible for students to understand the present when the version of history they learn is incomplete. Omitting entire groups from history curricula establishes and perpetuates those groups' invisibility, denies them proper representation in academic settings, and creates a situation in which students

are unaware of the context for so much that happens around them. Moreover, presenting an incomplete historical picture ignores the complexities with which history is rife and contributes to students viewing history as much more simplistic and less nuanced than it actually is. Social studies classes that fail to include LGBTQ+ history, then, convey inaccurate accounts of the Harlem Renaissance, McCarthyism, the civil rights movements of the 1960s, and the conservatism of the 1980s, to name a few. While it is impossible to present US history in its entirety over the course of an academic year, failing to discuss LGBTQ+ Americans' roles in various eras or certain events' effect on this community does a disservice to students learning about the nation's past. Additionally, the absence of LGBTQ+ history indirectly perpetuates homophobia; it is difficult to overcome discrimination when classroom experience indicates that the LGBTQ+ community's past is less important than the events teachers, textbooks, resources, and curriculum designers choose to address.

One of the most pressing problems facing social studies education today is students' belief that events that happened hundreds of years ago have no bearing on their lives.²⁴ Unlike other subjects that are more obviously practical later in life, learning about events from hundreds of years ago has no such immediate resonance. Therefore, anchoring social studies education in students' personal lives and the world in which they live offers one means to convey historical information in a manner that piques and maintains student interest. Twenty-first-century high school students across the country have encountered someone who identifies as LGBTQ+, either personally or in the media products they consume; many students identify as LGBTQ+ or question their gender identity and/or sexuality in their teenage years. Moreover, controversies relating to transgender and gender-neutral bathrooms, and the more recent focus on Black Trans lives, directly impact students' lives. LGBTQ+ history is not simply a relic of the past but a topic to which students can relate. Its inclusion has the power to make history more honest and relatable and to illustrate that past events are not as removed from the present as high school students might believe. In an educational era emphasizing literacy and math, efforts to maintain history's importance in students' lives and school curricula are essential.

As historian John D'Emilio contended, in the late twentieth century the study of LGBTQ+ history evolved from a topic largely ignored in scholarly circles to one in which groundbreaking works received academic attention.²⁵ This increased attention led to the emergence of courses focused on LGBTQ+ issues in higher education;²⁶ later, scholars focused on social studies education began to consider the dearth of information on LGBTQ+ issues in K-12 education. Building on

this trajectory, the following chapters evaluate the status of LGBTQ+ history instruction in high schools and resources pertaining to it, as well as resistance to that teaching, from 1990 to the present.

LGBTQ+-inclusive history education is a subject with increasing potential and momentum, but also, currently, a ceiling. Research and evidence indicate that a combination of grassroots efforts and top-down initiatives have contributed to progress in integrating LGBTQ+ history into high school US history classes that cannot and should not be ignored. More teachers incorporate LGBTQ+ figures, events, and issues in the curriculum they teach and the effort to do so receives greater media, legal, and educational attention than it did in the past. Six states and a growing number of counties and regions mandate its inclusion. There are also significant obstacles to widespread implementation of LGBTQ+-inclusive history, some of which may never be overcome. In many parts of the country this history's absence from state learning standards and a lack of institutional attention or support from both departments of education and LGBTQ+ advocacy groups impede fuller integration in US history classes. Meanwhile, in more conservative regions, deep-seeded resistance based on religious and political beliefs—some of which is codified in state law—stands in vehement opposition to discussions of LGBTQ+ history and issues in schools in any context. This is, therefore, a story of progress and possibility as well as opposition and tempered expectations.

Attempts to include LGBTQ+ information in classrooms often emphasize anti-bullying curricula and school safety initiatives, prioritizing this over inclusivity in academic subjects. Even the 2017 special issue of *Social Education*, a practitioner journal written for and read by social studies teachers, focused on school climate concerns and devoted one of its six articles to the way in which safety issues compel schools to implement inclusive curricula.²⁷ Social studies scholars have asserted the necessity of historically inclusive instruction, and there are and have been top-down, standards-focused attempts to push that agenda forward including California's FAIR Education Act and LGBTQ+ curriculum laws in New Jersey, Illinois, Oregon, Colorado, and Nevada. Despite these legislative and institutional mandates, though, LGBTQ+-inclusive history education receives neither the same widespread support nor financial resources nor manpower to turn scholars' contentions into reality in the same manner as anti-bullying and school climate initiatives. This lack of meaningful, widespread support undermines attempts to integrate this material and promote resources that might help teachers to do so.

There are myriad reasons for LGBTQ+ history's relative absence in social studies curricula. These reasons, though, have not squashed the motivation and attempts to incorporate LGBTQ+ issues and history in high school settings. Educators and advocates—like David France—who believe in and support this work consistently strive to find ways to turn their ideas into realities; their goals are hampered much more by a lack of institutional support than waning intentionality. In fact, the most significant obstacles to including LGBTQ+ history in high school US history classes—the lack of support from individuals and bodies that oversee education and policy, and the absence of this history from the standards that determine what students learn and the transmitted knowledge for which teachers are held accountable—can be reasonably overcome. Examining these multiple factors and perspectives, then, the following chapters highlight the ways in which they interact and impact upon attempts to include LGBTQ+ history in high school US history classes and the tenacity of and actions taken by educators and activists to ensure inclusivity despite these obstacles. It situates this struggle within the larger battle for LGBTQ+ rights and recognition and contextualizes it within the goals of social studies education.

The LGBTQ+ rights movement as a whole has made significant political and social progress, securing rights and access at a relatively rapid pace; advocates have and continue to devote resources and energy to workplace discrimination, AIDS, transgender rights, and marriage rights, among other legal efforts. Furthermore, the movement has long emphasized public education and awareness campaigns—the “coming out” process is a part of this effort—and promoted accurate media depictions of LGBTQ+ lifestyles and individuals. Schooling, however, was not a significant part of this educative process and, for several reasons, was not a priority for many gay rights activists in the second half of the twentieth century.²⁸ Though schooling has become more of a priority since 1990, most activists and organizations conceive of the need for LGBTQ+ inclusivity as it pertains to protecting and supporting queer and questioning teens; this corresponds with the movement's original agenda of ending harassment and recognizing differences.

Within schools, significant obstacles loom over any attempt to change social studies curriculum, especially where those revisions introduce information that any segment of the population might deem controversial. These hurdles, which have existed for years and intensified over time, challenge any real inclusion of LGBTQ+ history: a topic that must overcome both these general obstacles and people's fears and prejudices related to this material, in particular. Violence

perpetrated against LGBTQ+ individuals, especially teens like Matthew Shepard, and the fatal impact of bullying, as in the case of Tyler Clementi, contextualized within the overall national anti-bullying agenda, created space within schools for lessons pertaining to the treatment and tolerance of LGBTQ+ students and classmates. This opening does not exist in the same way for history, despite scholars' contentions and survey data suggesting that the potential impact could fulfill a more expansive range of goals.

Existing resources available to teachers and schools seeking to make their curricula more LGBTQ+-inclusive reflect this trend and address social studies' civic goals by promoting safe spaces and focusing on the language students use and the behaviors they practice (Chapter 4). History, in many cases, simply serves as a springboard or entry point to tasks and activities that highlight why it's wrong to say "that's so gay" and emphasize the ways in which inclusive climates benefit all students. Organizations began developing lessons focusing on LGBTQ+ history for the straightforward purpose of conveying that content to the K–12 market later on; there are still fewer such resources available (Chapter 5). The need for more resources, coupled with the fact that many teachers never learned this history and are not conscious of what they omit, makes it difficult for this material to get into classrooms in a meaningful way; this is evident in California, for example, where the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act mandates including LGBTQ+ history, yet few teachers had a clear strategy for implementing this legislation in their classrooms (Chapters 6 and 7).

There are advocacy groups, educators, and individuals that champion change and assert the benefits of teaching an LGBTQ+-inclusive history curriculum. Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN), for example, promotes LGBTQ+ History Month, giving schools and administrators a yearly opportunity to highlight the LGBTQ+ population's contributions to American society (Chapter 1). California scholars whose efforts helped to secure the passage of the FAIR Act and revisions to the state Framework also conducted professional development seminars throughout the state to assist teachers and build the necessary skills to effectively teach this information.²⁹ Moreover, there are teachers who incorporate this history into their classes and discuss the transformative results (Chapters 8–10). They are a minority, but a dedicated one. These advocates are the seeds of a possible grassroots movement, whereby the work that they do has the potential to spread to other classrooms, schools, and states to create a change in the way that high school students learn history. They must also confront the reality, though, that prevailing ideas, laws, and attitudes

in some regions in addition to conservatism and backlash to progressive advances make this effort more difficult, more pressing, and, possibly, even more relevant.

Social studies was established with the intention that young people's educational experiences should prepare them to participate in their communities and contribute to society. Though this is often conceived of in terms of political participation, acting as a member of one's community goes beyond voting or contacting one's representatives. Participation extends to understanding and being able to knowledgeably and civilly converse about important issues, as well. Failing to integrate LGBTQ+ history, then, especially in the twenty-first century, undermines the cause and rationale behind social studies education because schools are not properly preparing students to participate in the world around them politically or socially. In this case, students not only receive an incomplete historical education, but they also leave school without the foundation necessary to support their opinions on significant issues in the present. In an era when the Supreme Court annually hears cases pertaining to LGBTQ+ rights, transgender individuals become more prominent and confront increased discrimination, and even the acronym used to refer to this group constantly evolves, the mission of social studies demands the inclusion of LGBTQ+ history.

There are compelling reasons to teach this history, as cited by scholars and advocates and witnessed in inclusive classrooms. Moreover, introducing this material in an academic subject offers students a greater number of perspectives from which to consider ideas with which they are presented elsewhere. As Stephen Thornton posited in 2014, teaching young people about LGBTQ+ history and issues can make a significant difference in how we discuss these matters and events as a nation.³⁰ Lyndsey Schlax, a San Francisco teacher who spearheaded an LGBTQ+ history elective, marveled at her students' ability to do just that, engaging in conversations they never could or would have prior to a semester immersed in this history. Her reaction, encapsulating the sentiments of others working for a similar goal, illustrates the determination of those who believe in inclusive curriculum and its place in social studies: "Be ready to fight, because it's worth it."³¹