Imagine, as was once the case, that today’s social studies curriculum measured all else against a standard of being male, Protestant, and Anglo-Saxon.¹ Women, African Americans, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Muslims, not to mention other religious, ethnic, and racial groups, would react with righteous outrage. With justification, we can claim that today’s social studies curriculum has become more inclusive of a range of groups and perspectives within and beyond the United States.

Although still imperfect, the contemporary K-12 social studies curriculum has moved away from the tacit equating of “American” with, for example, Protestant, or Christian for that matter. At least one major exception to this legitimation of diversity persists: it is still tacitly assumed that everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise. Despite striking growth in social, political, legal, and media presence of gays in American life, especially in the past decade,² few social studies materials appear to have substantive treatment of gay history and issues. Indeed, many of these materials fail to even mention such words as homosexual, straight, or gay. It is as if the millions of gay inhabitants of the United States, past and present, did not exist. Although scholarship studied in colleges is now sometimes rich with gay material, Americans who do not attend college—and the least educated are precisely those who are most inclined to be prejudiced against gay people³—are unlikely to hear of such scholarship.

The belief that the archetypal human is straight is called heteronormativity. It belies an inclusive curriculum. Moreover, it encourages stereotypes. As James Banks has warned, using a “mainstream” benchmark against which group differences are measured promotes “a kind of ‘we-they’ attitude among mainstream students and teachers.”⁴ Banks’s observation about multiethnic education seems equally applicable to the study of homosexuals: “Ethnic content should be used to help students learn that all human beings have common needs and characteristics, although the ways in which these traits are manifested frequently differ cross-culturally.”⁵

Heteronormativity goes basically unchallenged in teaching materials for K-12 social studies. Unless children are raised in a limited number of locales or have teachers who go beyond what the textbook provides, they may graduate from high school being none the wiser that heteronormativity paints an inaccurate picture of social life and perpetuates intolerance, sometimes with tangibly destructive consequences such as harassment and physical violence.⁶

Curricular Limitations of Current Inclusion

The social studies curriculum, because it must make some attempt at describing the world as it is, has always dealt with “difference.” The debate, as Margaret Smith Crocco shows, has centered on what the differences are and how they have been dealt with.⁷ The common failure even to mention the existence of lesbians and gay men (let alone bisexual and transgender persons) clearly clashes with gay matters today being a visible part of the public landscape in most of America. Thus, a first step that social studies educators need to take is frank acknowledgment that differences in sexual orientation (and other taboo subjects such as religion) exist in America.⁸ To put it another way, educators must answer the question, Does everybody count as human?⁹

One current and widely used U.S. history high school textbook is illustrative of the current failures. In its treatment of postwar African American novelists, James Baldwin is described as writing about “patterns of discrimination” directed toward blacks. This point is placed as a precursor to the struggle against racial injustice in the civil rights era.

The text is silent, however, about Baldwin’s being both African American and homosexual. He wrote eloquently of “patterns of discrimination” directed toward gay men. For example, in Giovanni’s Room and in Another Country, which were written in the same postwar and civil rights period of American history, Baldwin explores how young gay men fled prejudice in family and community in the United States for the relative anonymity of Paris.¹⁰

This silence on homosexual expatriate writers stands in stark contrast to the treatment of heterosexual expatriate writers. U.S. history textbooks routinely discuss the “lost generation” of the 1920s, the group of literary artists such as Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald who, disillusioned with American materialism, traveled to Paris searching for meaning. Their fictional characters and the motives of these characters are frequently canonized in high school history textbooks, while Baldwin’s fictional gay
characters and the motives of his characters go unmentioned.

The same silences that characterize the American history curriculum appear in global history and geography. Take the subject of human rights. There has been a great deal of attention, especially since September 11, 2001, to the oppression of Afghan women by the harsh, extremist brand of Islam embraced by the Taliban. Properly, this denial of basic human rights to women has widely stood condemned both in the West and in the Islamic world. But no such condemnation of systematic persecution of gay men (or allegedly gay men) in parts of the Islamic world, such as recently in Egypt, appears in the curriculum although, as with Afghan women, the persecution rests on these men simply for being who they are.

Social studies courses most directly devoted to citizenship, such as government and civics, routinely extol the freedoms Americans enjoy because they are Americans. That such freedoms still extend only to some people and not to others, however, is likely to go unmentioned in textbooks. For example, unlike important allies such as the United Kingdom, of whose armed forces in Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf we have heard so much recently, U.S. armed forces legally discriminate against lesbians and gay men. Although American youngsters will certainly study American freedoms in social studies courses, they may never be told or question that other closely associated nations also extend freedoms to gays that are denied them in the United States. American history and government texts justifiably vaunt our belief in self-evident rights dating back to at least 1776; they omit that some of these rights are selectively available depending on a person’s sexual orientation.

The limitations of the current curriculum, however, run deeper than exclusion from history and other courses. Although acknowledgment of the humanity of gay people and democratic tolerance for them should be fundamental, these aims fail to strike at the heart of heteronormativity. While it is generally acknowledged that the social studies should prepare young
people for citizenship, gay people are vulnerable to the way freedom to participate fully in the affairs of the state is defined. At present, as Nel Noddings writes, it seems that “to improve their status, the vulnerable must either become more like the privileged or accept some charitable form of the respect taken for granted by those acknowledged as full citizens.”11 In other words, even if gay people were identified as gay people in the curriculum, this begs the questions of what should be said about them and from what perspectives.

The Hidden Curriculum Everybody Sees

The hidden curriculum of schools rigidly patrols the boundaries of sex role behavior. Homophobia is common in American schools.12 Although unmentioned in the publicly announced curriculum, all young people learn that sex role deviance, actual or perceived, exacts a heavy price. It is surely one of the most successful exercises in social training that schools perform. Moreover, this unannounced curriculum functions in practically all schools regardless of racial and ethnic composition, social class, and so forth. Indeed, young people who are themselves oppressed by poverty, crime, or racial mistreatment frequently become oppressors of peers perceived to be gay.13

Whether by choice or neglect, school professionals are implicated in patrolling sex role boundaries.14 In corridors and classrooms, for example, few if any taunts are more common than “fag,” and embedded in history textbooks are messages about what it means to behave in a “masculine” fashion.15 In other parts of school grounds such as parking lots, bathrooms, and locker rooms, where youngsters are frequently unsupervised by adults who know them, sex role deviations sometimes meet with physical violence.

There seems to be a variety of motives for how teachers respond to all of this. Some teachers may be afraid of being labeled “gay” if they correct students for bigoted behavior. Disturbingly, some teachers appear to agree with condemnations of perceived departures from “normal” sex roles; girls must be “feminine” and boys must not be “effeminate.” They may ignore, and sometimes even encourage, harassment of students perceived to be gay. Administrators and teachers may counsel harassed students to avoid “flaunting” their allegedly deviant behavior, in effect, blaming the victim.16

What is clear is that administrators and teachers are not being neutral or impartial when they ignore this hidden curriculum. Silence, far from neutral, implicitly condones continuation of the persecution. Studies have long shown that depression and suicide are far more common among youngsters who are gay than among their straight peers.17 School professionals—classroom teachers, administrators, counselors, and librarians—are frequently the only responsible adults to whom these at-risk children can turn for both needed support and equal educational opportunities.

Toward More Inclusive Curriculum

It is too easy for educators to feel absolved of responsibility because authorities have frequently omitted gay people and gay issues from curriculum documents and materials. Moreover, censorship of gay material is commonplace. Ominously, these forms of neglect exist alongside a persistent countermovement. Every step forward for the well-being of gay students and a curriculum more inclusive of lesbian and gay experience has been doggedly challenged by anti-gay groups.18

Teachers have choices. All teachers are curricular-instructional gatekeepers—they largely decide the day-to-day curriculum and activities students experience.19 How teachers enact curriculum, even with today’s constraints such as standards and high-stakes tests, still matters both practically and ethically. Opportunities to incorporate at least some gay material into the standard curriculum exist; in many instances, all that is required is the will to call attention to aspects of standard subject matter that heretofore went unmentioned.

Quite a few inclusion opportunities in mainstay secondary school courses such as U.S. history, world history, and geography present themselves. No U.S. history survey textbook that I have seen, for instance, omits Jane Addams. She is rightly portrayed as one of the nation’s greatest social and educational thinkers and activists, not to mention her formidable work for world peace. Addams never married. She chose to spend her adult life among a community of women and had a long-time special relationship with one woman.20 This may raise ample opportunities for properly directed class discussion: What did it mean that a considerable number of educated women of Addams’s means and generation chose to forsake marriage and pursue careers beyond domesticity? Were they models for gender equity for later generations of women’s rights and equity advocates?

Note, we have not directly addressed Addams’s sexual orientation. (The evidence, in any case, seems inconclusive.) Perhaps more important than a rush or need to judge, however, is to ask if this woman’s accomplishments would be diminished or enhanced by such knowledge. Or a primary educational objective could be to understand how Addams, who rejected some gender conventions for her day, helped shape her times and her legacy for today. Her significance, in this scheme, incorporates the complexities and controversial aspects of her life as well as speaking to different but nonetheless related questions today.

Other topics such as the ancient world in global history courses provide different pathways to incorporate the gay experience. Again, let me underscore that we are still working with standard material in the curriculum. No new instructional materials are required. Specialist knowledge, while as desirable as ever, is unessential.

Take the topic of Alexander the Great. One high school world history textbook I examined, for example, shows how, through his military genius and statesmanship, Alexander built a “multicultural” empire. Although adjectives such as “multicultural” (and “gay” for that matter) are anachronistic here, the point for today’s readers seems plain enough: Alexander was a leader, probably before his time, in building what we might call today an inclusive society.

Here we might pause to challenge how inclusive (or “multicultural”) this textbook treatment is. No mention is made of Alexander’s homosexuality. Teachers, however, could readily
place Alexander’s homosexuality in its cultural and temporal context. In those terms, his sexual orientation was relatively unremarkable. Sensitive to the extent may lead students to rethink stereotypes of both warriors and homosexuals.

Classical Greece provides numerous opportunities to explore beyond the information given. Textbooks routinely feature photographs of idealized male images such as Greek athletes and actors. Why did the Greeks so prize the male form? What does it reveal about their culture? How does it relate to today’s notions of athleticism and the arts? How is the ideal of male community perpetuated by today’s college campus fraternities?

Of course, gay materials may also be an instructional focus rather than ancillary to the main part of a lesson or unit. In U.S. history courses, a unit on the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s is standard. These days a wide range of groups in addition to African Americans are often featured in this unit, such as Latinos, women, Native Americans, and so forth. But seldom does this extend to gay people. Such a unit could be made more genuinely inclusive if it also included a lesson devoted to a turning point in civil rights for gay people, such as the 1969 Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village, New York City.

Although much more the exception than the rule, teachers in some parts of the country have designed instructional sequences on gay topics longer than a lesson or two. One civics teacher, for example, as part of a nine-week unit on “Tolerance and Diversity,” included a two-week mini-unit on “Homophobia Prevention.” He has written of the experience and materials he used.

Current events instruction is also a ready site for dealing with gay material. By way of illustration, recently published secondary school American history textbooks are silent on the “history” of former U.S. President Bill Clinton’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy for gays in the military. Teachers, however, could still treat this rights topic in the classroom because the media report on it with some regularity. A good issue for critical thinking might be why the number of persons discharged from the armed forces for their homosexuality has continued to rise in the decade since the supposed implementation of the policy.

Conclusion

Even concerned and willing educators face some significant obstacles to incorporating gay material in the curriculum. Many veteran teachers may never have studied gay material during their preservice teacher education programs, either in academic or professional courses. As noted, this situation has changed somewhat in the academy today in courses in history, the social sciences, and literature. In teacher education, too, the situation has altered. “Student sexual diversity guidelines for teachers,” now appear in some teacher education textbooks, for instance. Furthermore, explicit training for and sensitivity to inclusion is now common in teacher education programs in diverse regions of the nation. We probably shouldn’t expect, however, in-service workshops devoted to gay subject matter to arise everywhere in the nation any time soon. But nearly everywhere the legal realities of protecting the rights of gay students, if nothing else, may compel some staff development.

Heteronormativity is also a concern because many students in our schools now have parents who are gay or lesbian. These children have the same rights to an equal education as do their peers whose parents are heterosexual. About ten years ago, however, a storm of controversy erupted in New York City when it was suggested that the children’s book Heather Has Two Mommies even be allowed as an option to be included on a several hundred-page list of curriculum ideas on diversity from which teachers might choose.

Although it is now most noticeable in large cities, many schoolchildren across the nation have lesbian or gay parents. Yet only “traditional” families tend to be included in the curriculum. Despite Heather’s apparent sensitivity to appropriate treatment for the intended age group, this failed to prevent its being removed from the list of suggested (not mandated) books. However, at least some more encouraging reports of teachers addressing the issue of nontraditional families have appeared more recently. For example, one New York City teacher reported on positive outcomes from teaching a novel to middle school students that concerned a boy coming to terms with his father’s being gay.

If we are to be inclusive in the social studies curriculum, then the kinds of changes I have sketched here are vital first steps. The alternative, if many educators perpetuate heteronormativity, is that most young people will continue to learn about homosexuality through a popular prejudiced lens.

Notes

5. Ibid., 175.
22. David Harris has developed a scoring rubric for classroom discussions of controversial issues, in which he uses this issue as the running example. See David Harris, “Classroom Assessment of Civic Discourse,” in Education for Democracy: Contexts, Curricula, and Assessments, ed. Walter C. Parker (Greenwich, CT: Information Age, 2002).
23. See, for example, Myra Pollack Sadker and David Miller Sadker, Teachers, Schools, and Society (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2000).

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