

# An LGBTQ+ Inclusive Social Studies: Curricular and Instructional Considerations

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On June 15, 2005, the Hillsborough County Board of Commissioners in Tampa, Florida, took decisive steps to forbid government support for gay pride events. The issue came under scrutiny when a public library created a gay-themed informational display. When the commissioners learned of the display, they voted overwhelmingly (5 to 1) in favor of a policy prohibiting the promotion of gay pride events.

Within a few months of the ruling, formal objections to gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in the county's public school system were filed. Some parents argued that "sexually oriented" clubs were inappropriate in schools; others claimed that resources for gay students already existed in the form of guidance counseling and policies against bullying.<sup>1</sup> Anti-gay parents and citizens besieged the school superintendent and demanded that principals disband the GSA clubs.

At the same time, Florida was witnessing the construction of a state amendment to ban same-sex marriage, domestic partnerships, and civil unions,<sup>2</sup> and was the only U.S. state to have an outright ban on adoption by same-sex couples.<sup>3</sup> A *Miami Herald* and *St. Petersburg Times* poll reported that 65% of Floridians opposed same-sex marriage, with the greatest level of opposition (72%) emanating from the Tampa Bay area.<sup>4</sup>

Teachers who chose to include LGBTQ+ issues in their lessons worried that their academic freedom would soon come under siege. Including controversial content in such a politically charged environment when official curricular mandates remain silent can have

a chilling effect in the classroom.

Although we believe the historic Supreme Court decision in June 2015 making marriage equality a nationwide right will ultimately result in a more positive and inclusive curriculum, resistance can still be felt across the nation. In the meantime, social studies teachers wishing to address LGBTQ+ history and related topics have to make conscious curricular and instructional decisions. Having an understanding of and commitment to LGBTQ+ equality is an important first step, but taking strides towards actual implementation of an inclusive curriculum is what is needed to make social studies instruction truly comprehensive. In this article, we discuss the state of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the K-12 curriculum, make the case for LGBTQ+ inclusive social studies, and offer some pedagogical suggestions for the integration of this content into the mainstream curriculum.

## The State of LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the K-12 Curriculum

Despite some heartening developments in both the legal realm—most notably *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015)—and in

attitudinal changes in society, LGBTQ+ issues in the social studies curriculum remain marginalized or nonexistent. While progress has been made since Amnesty International's first "Breaking the Silence" campaign in 1994 and the observance of LGBT History Month the same year, the social studies curriculum continues to be silent on the people, events, and critical issues that comprise the history of LGBTQ+ people.<sup>5</sup>

Yet there are four notable exceptions: California, Massachusetts, New York and Washington state. California's 2011 Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act calls for the integration of age-appropriate content related to LGBT people and people with disabilities into social studies and history instruction. It was an expansion of the already-existing study of the contributions of diverse groups.<sup>6</sup> The measure also contains anti-discrimination protections for sexual orientation and gender identity and prohibits discriminatory practice in school activities, instruction, and curricular materials. As of March 24, 2015, Massachusetts now requires the curricular inclusion of issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity. The states of New York and Washington also now have curricula that teach about gender, orientation, and issues facing the LGTBQ+ community.

On the other end of the spectrum, a number of states restrict what can be

taught with respect to LGBTQ+ content. States with such restrictions are Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas. Teachers in these states may experience an encroachment on their freedom of academic expression, schools may have fewer LGBTQ+ related resources, and LGBTQ+ students may find themselves in a hostile school environment.

To protect them, some states have passed anti-bullying laws for LGBTQ+ students. They include Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington. In these states, official policies forbid gender-based bullying and harassment and encourage teachers and administrators to establish a respectful and supportive school environment for all students (visit the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network website, GLSEN.org, to learn about model laws and policies).

As teachers and students across the nation find alternative strategies for building an inclusive curriculum and keeping students safe, considerable support must be given to gay-straight alliances at school. A GSA can act as a surrogate classroom and a safe space for students seeking to increase their understanding of LGBTQ+ issues. Teachers interested in sponsoring a student-run GSA under somewhat hostile conditions should heed the advice of Warren Blumenfeld, who suggests building coalitions across campus and collaborating with straight faculty who have an established rapport with students and parents alike. Blumenfeld further points out that having a “principal with principles” makes it more likely that GSAs will succeed.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Case for an LGBTQ+ Inclusive Social Studies Curriculum**

From a purely academic perspective, excluding LGBTQ+ history and issues is simply inaccurate. Scott Hirschfeld’s

content analysis of 13 of the most widely used U.S. history textbooks revealed that in over 12,000 pages of text, less than one page addressed LGBT concerns.<sup>8</sup> Over 10 years later, a cursory perusal of most history books reflects this continuing, disturbing exclusion. At the very least, as Jennings contends, this omission is “intellectually dishonest” and a “distortion of the historical record.”<sup>9</sup> Just as we would not think to exclude the contributions of—and issues particular to—women, African Americans, Latinos/as, and other marginalized groups from school textbooks, so too should we be cognizant that an entire group of LGBTQ+ people have been virtually erased from the curriculum. As Jennings puts it, when we leave out LGBT history, “we teach our students an incomplete record of our past.”<sup>10</sup> Exclusion is further compounded for LGBTQ+ people of color, such as Bayard Rustin, whose collaboration with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights movement was crucial to its success. LGBTQ+ people were also key contributors to the Harlem Renaissance, yet are rarely identified as such, despite historian Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s observation that the Harlem Renaissance “was surely as gay as it was black.”<sup>11</sup>

Another compelling reason to have an inclusive curriculum is that a sizeable portion of students (5% is often provided as a conservative estimate, or about 2.5 million school-age children) will identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, 2016 was the first year where just over half of the children enrolled in American public schools identified as students of color, resulting in at least 1.2 million LGBTQ+ students of color in our nation’s schools. These individuals experience not only the harassment and assault that most LGBTQ+ students face, but also additional discrimination due to their race or ethnicity.<sup>13</sup> These demographic realities provide convincing grounds for an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum—a curriculum that addresses why and how injustice and inequality exist and how an improvement for the LGBTQ+ popula-

tion can be accomplished.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the 2010 U.S. Census revealed that there was an 80% increase in same-sex households in the previous decade and that approximately 25% of same-sex household couples are raising children. Many of these children are presumably attending public schools, and therefore an inclusive curriculum would address their needs as well.

### **A Brief History of LGBTQ+ Issues in the Social Studies Curriculum**

Much of the scholarly writing on LGBTQ+ issues to date has focused on LGBTQ+ students and/or their families, the school climate, and gay-straight alliances on campus.<sup>15</sup> A significant portion of the extant scholarship centers on adolescent psychology and gay teens’ special developmental needs. James Sears’s comprehensive encyclopedia examines research, policy, and issues affecting LGBT youth. In the field of social studies education, however, precious little has been published.<sup>16</sup>

One of the first direct curricular discussions of the subject in social studies education was Stephen J. Thornton’s 1994 article, “The Social Studies near Century’s End.”<sup>17</sup> In his analysis, Thornton situated the teaching of LGBT issues and individuals within the larger curricular contexts of diversity, inclusion, and perspective taking. While he bemoaned the topic’s nonexistence in the curriculum, Thornton saw the enactment of New York City’s *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum as an expression of things changing for the better. A year later, Rahima Wade argued persuasively that “diversity in religion and sexual orientation are part of the human experience in the United States” and because our students will necessarily be citizens in a diverse society, these topics deserve a place in the social studies curriculum. Wade asserted that a democratic civic life demands an acceptance of controversy and diversity, and a good place to start is at the elementary-school level.<sup>18</sup> Ronald Evans and Jerry Brodkey went one step further in suggesting a semester-



Bulletin boards like this one from Robert Bailey's high school classroom, with themes such as LGBTQ+ artists, athletes, and people of color, help highlight LGBTQ+ contributions throughout world history.

long course that would examine historical and cultural perspectives on gender and sexuality. They proposed two units of instruction centered on gay rights and the changing structure of contemporary families.<sup>19</sup>

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the topic began receiving more attention in the academic press related to the social studies curriculum. *Theory and Research in Social Education* published a themed issue on the topic in 2002. Thornton's (2002) opening essay, "Does Everybody Count as Human?" acknowledged that while there had been an increase in attention to gender and gender relations in the social studies curriculum, the contributions and achievements of LGBT people were "not even blips on the social studies radar screen."<sup>20</sup> Brian Marchman (2002) described a unit on "homophobia prevention" in high school civics.<sup>21</sup> However, the majority of the authors in the special issue related their experiences in university-level courses, not at the K-12 level.

Thornton later empowered social studies teachers to consider a more inclusive curriculum by reminding them that they are instructional-curricular gatekeepers.

He urged them to study the mainstream curriculum and "call attention to aspects of standard subject matter that heretofore went unmentioned." Thornton went on to provide several examples of gay history and issues that could easily be incorporated into the standard social studies curriculum.<sup>22</sup>

But these exhortations seemingly fell on deaf ears. Sandra Schmidt laments that LGBT issues remain marginalized in the social studies curriculum.<sup>23</sup> At a time in our nation's history when LGBT topics are discussed openly and critically in virtually all aspects of society, social studies education remains silent.<sup>24</sup> J. B. Mayo's study of the social and political forces that influence decision making by gay high school teachers underscores this silence; he concluded that gay teachers feel compelled to conform to expected norms, finding it difficult if not impossible to introduce gay-themed topics while teaching the mandated curriculum.<sup>25</sup>

We are now at a threshold, what Schmidt calls the "moments of possibility," in our field—a time when our society is undergoing a fundamental paradigm shift and allowing thought and practice

that have heretofore been inconceivable.<sup>26</sup> We must seize this opportunity to advance an inclusive social studies curriculum, one that is accurate, sensitive, and comprehensive.

### LGBTQ+ Inclusive Social Studies

Combatting homophobia requires, in Arthur Lipkin's words, "conscientious curriculum change."<sup>27</sup> Yet the majority (77.6%) of U.S. students do not have access to an inclusive curriculum.<sup>28</sup> Jennings points out the many reasons why some social studies teachers—despite an understanding of and commitment to LGBT equality—may shy away from including these issues in their teaching.<sup>29</sup> Some of the reasons are an already-crowded curriculum, the imperative to prepare students for state-mandated and/or standardized tests, and a lack of training or skills to teach about LGBT history and issues effectively. Queer theory and queer pedagogy offer some useful constructs and strategies to consider.

Queer pedagogy "explores ways in which educators can 'queer' the curriculum, or teach in ways that call into question what is often taken for granted."<sup>30</sup>

In this context, teachers and curriculum developers should consider both the content and how the curriculum is organized. A number of scholars have put forth a variety of suggestions, including David Donahue, who aptly points to the works of both James Banks and Kevin Kumashiro.<sup>31</sup> Banks warns of integrative methods that only touch the surface (the contributions approach and the additive approach) and recommends that teachers instead push beyond these (by using the transformational approach and the social action approach). Kumashiro asks educators to consider their purpose; that is, is the lesson developed to teach for the other, teach *about* the other, be *critical* of privileging certain conditions, or promote an education that *challenges* students and society? Others would ask that an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum be organized according to specific paradigms, including queer theory, feminist theory, post-structuralist theory, or social justice theory, to name a few.<sup>32</sup>

Teachers of history can consult tomes on the contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals, revealing a rich and little-known history.<sup>33</sup> In world history and world cultures courses, Greco-Roman history provides an opportunity to consider that same-sex relations have not always been considered aberrant (see John Boswell's classic work, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*).<sup>34</sup> Many historical figures from this time period, such as Socrates, Sophocles, Aristotle, Sappho, Julius Caesar, and Alexander the Great, had documented gay experiences, although an important consideration would be for students to ponder how the notion of being homosexual is a relatively modern phenomenon.<sup>35</sup>

Asian history, too, abounds with a rich account of LGBT experiences. Homosexuality was an accepted form of love in China, documented as far back as the beginning of the Han Dynasty (206 BC), and was common among Chinese emperors so long as they also produced an heir.<sup>36</sup> The first restrictive decree appears in 1740 as the area experienced greater Western involvement.

The Holocaust, too, is an opportunity to discuss that between 10,000 and 15,000 homosexual men were persecuted under a number of legislative efforts, particularly the Reich criminal code.<sup>37</sup> During the Nuremberg trials, Nazi officers were never questioned about the thousands of gay executions, castrations, and re-educative efforts in which they participated. Further, under Allied occupation, Germans were permitted to continue the incarceration of gay men for years after the war ended, as homosexuality remained an offense in Germany until 1969.

U.S. history courses offer several opportune points to discuss gay individuals and issues. The study of the first societies in North America can include the mention of Two-Spirit people, who have been documented in over 130 First Nation or Native American nations.<sup>38</sup> Any study of the McCarthy Era should include discussion of the Johns Commission and gay Americans who were among those considered "subversives" with increased potential to participate in the communist conspiracy the United States was battling. The civil rights era also provides multiple points of study and discussion: the Stonewall riots, the feminist movement, and the activism of Bayard Rustin are all part of the story of civil rights in America.

Teachers of government and legal studies can contextualize gay rights and issues within the larger area of human rights and democratic principles.<sup>39</sup> Curricula such as the University of Minnesota's *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights: A Human Rights Perspective* can be useful in guiding students through a thoughtful examination of LGBTQ+ issues using the UN's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.<sup>40</sup> Students need to understand that the rights to expression, assembly, security, employment, marriage, and family are basic rights guaranteed to all people, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. The 2015 Supreme Court case of *Obergefell v. Hodges* can be examined in a discussion of state and federal rights, and in comparison

to *Loving v. Virginia* (1967). Teachers can also facilitate an understanding of LGBTQ+ related legislation around the world through an analysis of laws worldwide that protect, restrict, or criminalize gay rights.

In sociology, anthropology, and other social sciences where discrimination and prejudice are studied, the struggle for gay rights can be situated within the larger movement for human rights. Units of study on marriage and family can examine the changing nature of familial groups and can incorporate cross-cultural comparisons across time and space. The study of family structures is particularly appropriate at the elementary-school level. Families headed by same-sex parents can be one of several groupings that include extended families, widowed parents, adoptive parents, and foster families. Books such as *And Tango Makes Three* and *The Great Big Book of Families* affirm that there are many kinds of loving families.<sup>41</sup>

In 1999, Jennings reminded educators that anti-gay slurs had become the "mantra of elementary school children," who use the term "gay" to mean *bad*.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, 18 years later, elementary schools continue to be sites of biased language, name-calling, and bullying behavior.<sup>43</sup> When elementary teachers, curricula, and schools ignore this problem, they can serve to reinforce or even condone acts of intolerance and violence, behaviors that endure well into adult life. While some might be interested in excluding the discussion of human sexuality in the elementary classroom, research provides a number of reasons to do otherwise. Kathy Bickmore reports that knowledge of same-sex relationships already exists among elementary-age children and that information on same-sex relations is frequently shared covertly, resulting in inaccuracies and bigotry. She also points out that in today's age, the media is depicting same-sex relations more often, exposing younger children to the reality in which they live.<sup>44</sup>

Elementary educators, then, have an especially important role to play in



promoting tolerance and fostering acceptance. It is well documented that young children have schemas that include notions of gender and sexuality.<sup>45</sup> Most of these constructs are traditional and stereotypical, often reinforced by the official curriculum. Elementary teachers can and should correct misinformation and offer multiple perspectives in their classrooms. Traditional activities associated with Mother's Day and Father's Day, for example, should be expanded so that all children's families are affirmed.<sup>46</sup> Curricular materials can be supplemented to reflect diversity and inclusivity. *It's Elementary* is a documentary that offers age-appropriate strategies for discussing LGBTQ+ issues with young children. A follow-up film, *It's STILL Elementary*, examines the impact the first film had on teachers and students. An accompanying curriculum guide provides lessons, resources, and websites that can be used by teachers for classroom instruction.<sup>47</sup>

The discussion of current events, including gay issues and legal rights, the evolution of the modern gay identity, and activism and politics, can be easily incorporated across the social studies. Specific events, such as Coming Out Day or LGBT History Month, can provide an impetus for inclusion and immediacy in the classroom. Likewise, contemporary legal challenges and changes in military policy and practices can also present a natural entrée to the topic.

### **Sensitive and Responsive Instruction**

What are some teaching strategies that can advance inclusive social studies? To begin with, we believe that discussion is at the heart of a good social studies lesson. Unfortunately, teachers often exclude the topic of gay rights<sup>48</sup> and heteronormativity continues to dominate and influence classroom discussion.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, establishing a classroom environment where respectful debate and discussion are encouraged is crucial for integrating issues of gender and sexuality.<sup>50</sup> Diverse perspectives can be

presented and deliberated, giving the teacher the opportunity to guide discussion, examine viewpoints, and dispel any misconceptions.

To spark discussion, political cartoons can provide an entry point. Using a scaffolded questioning approach, teachers should ask students to first identify any easily recognized symbols in the cartoon, describe the setting and action, then paraphrase the cartoonist's message, the purpose behind the cartoon, and the intended audience. Finally, students can weigh in on their stance on the issue and support their position with evidence. While there is no shortage of political cartoons available online depicting the LGBTQ+ struggle, *U.S. News and World Report* has provided an easy-to-use portal with dozens of political cartoons on same-sex marriage, [www.usnews.com/cartoons/same-sex-marriage-cartoons](http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/same-sex-marriage-cartoons).

The power of using historical and contemporary images in the social studies has been well documented.<sup>51</sup> Like political cartoons, the visual nature of photographs can prompt analysis and discussion. Students can use an established photograph analysis worksheet or teachers can guide them through the analysis by using a progressive, scaffolded questioning strategy. Lipkin suggests a unit of study that begins with images of the 1969 riots at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village.<sup>52</sup> Beginning a study of gay history with this event pulls students into vivid conflict. They are then asked to consider questions like: Who were these people? Why were they there? Had there always been gay people in New York? What is the significance of this event historically: Was it a turning point in our national awareness? How does it compare with other similar historical events? For lessons such as these, the National Archives offers online resources that are easily reproducible for classroom use ([www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo.html](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo.html)).

Role playing can increase empathy toward the LGBTQ+ population and

result in a more nuanced understanding of complex issues. Nancye McCrary (2002) suggests that to develop empathy, lessons ideally should be interactive, include the aesthetic, and involve multimedia.<sup>53</sup> A number of role-playing scenarios can be found online and in curriculum handbooks. One we have found particularly useful for the classroom is *Jeff's Story*, [www.uky.edu/~nmcacro/JeffsStory/main.html](http://www.uky.edu/~nmcacro/JeffsStory/main.html). *Jeff's Story* considers the perspective of parents approached by their teenage son who has declared himself gay. This resource not only provides a case study, but also guides students through a decision-making process and equips teachers with a number of resources, discussion questions, and links to information-rich organizations.

Mapping activities can be integrated throughout the social studies curriculum to not only strengthen geographic skills, but also to help students visualize the state of LGBTQ+ related legislation and policies in the U.S. and the world. As we described in a recent article, locating and comparing which countries have legalized same-sex marriage and which prohibit or criminalize it can help students better understand the complex nature of the debate.<sup>54</sup>

### **As Florida Goes, So Goes the Nation**

Considerable gains have been made in Hillsborough County, Florida, in the past 12 years. Despite efforts to keep gay issues out of the schools, the school board upheld the rights of students to operate gay-straight alliances.<sup>55</sup> Hillsborough County Commissioners also retracted their ban on gay-themed events in a unanimous 7–0 vote on June 5, 2013, led by the county's first openly gay elected official and supported by fellow Republican and Democratic colleagues.<sup>56</sup> That same year, 75% of Floridians supported civil unions for same-sex couples.<sup>57</sup> Finally, in August 2014, U.S. District Court Judge Robert Hinkle found the Florida ban on same-sex marriage to be unconstitutional, which was affirmed by the U.S. 11th

Circuit Court upon appeal, paving the way for statewide marriage equality. In January 2015, same-sex marriage became legal.

Despite this progress, however, barriers to equality continue to be erected. After the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision was announced, Florida senator and then-Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio declared,

This decision short-circuits the political process that has been underway on the state level for years. ... The next president and all in public office must strive to protect the First Amendment rights of religious institutions and millions of Americans whose faiths hold a traditional view of marriage.<sup>58</sup>

In addition, a county mandate to include LGBTQ+ content in educational curricula remains lacking and the decision to include such lessons is at the discretion of individual teachers. Clearly, the stalemate is far from over.

Since the 2016 elections, significant efforts have been made to hinder or reverse LGBTQ+ gains. While the Trump administration had originally expressed support for LGBTQ+ rights, it has failed to take action to protect these rights. It appears that the administration is attempting to reduce federal involvement, while allowing for the possibility of greater state input on the issue.

Conversations at the state and local levels changed significantly after economic opposition to discrimination caused North Carolina's H.B. 2 legislation to fail. Many states have regrouped and repackaged their opposition under the veil of religious liberty. These "religious freedom" laws have taken on many forms, from allowing businesses to deny service to customers who fail to conform with the proprietors' religious beliefs to Alabama's H.B. 24, known as the Alabama Child Placing Agency Inclusion Act, which allows adoption agencies to refuse a same-sex couple's

application to become parents. Even Hillsborough County, Florida, which has made so much progress since 2005, seems to be taking a step back and giving in to local, conservative religious pressures as the school board recently deliberately voted to exclude gender expression from its do-not-discriminate list.<sup>59</sup>

Teachers concerned for the health, happiness, and intellectual growth of the students under their care should recognize that this ongoing national debate has ramifications for young lives, many of whom rely on school for the support they may be lacking at home. While many teachers may feel comfortable working with LGBTQ+ students and their families, they do not have the same sense of self-efficacy teaching LGBTQ+ related content and addressing bias in school teaching materials and environments.<sup>60</sup>

### Concluding Thoughts

An inclusive K-12 curriculum is both intellectually necessary and sensitively fitting given our schools' diverse student bodies. As our nation and world become more accepting of all peoples, so too must schooling reflect the myriad of human relations and family structures on Earth. Social studies, given its mission of preparing youth for active citizenship, must be at the forefront of this educational movement. NCSS recognizes this imperative and in 2016 passed a Resolution for the Explicit Support of NCSS for the Inclusion of LGBTQ+ Issues in the Social Studies Classroom (# 16-02-4).<sup>61</sup>

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded the nation in 1967 at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." In June 2015, we witnessed the bending toward justice through marriage equality for all people. Change is inescapable and so too, the exclusion of LGBTQ+ content from classrooms across the country will inevitably end. It is up to us as educators to hasten this journey toward justice. 🌈

### Notes

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