

LGBTQ+ Students and Schools – Building Spaces of Belonging

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Serving 11 states and D.C., the IDRA EAC-*South* is one of four federally-funded centers that provide technical assistance and training to build capacity to confront educational problems occasioned by discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, sex and gender, and religion.

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Thank you, queer elders for creating and protecting the right to be, beyond borders – everywhere – always.

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“I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior.”

– Audre Lorde, author

The Category Is*: Introduction

Queer folks have been here, always, and everywhere, though we would not know that based on most K-12, undergraduate, and even graduate level courses in the United States. Despite best efforts across time and space to delegitimize, erase, and “convert” queer communities, our bodies, spirits, and imaginations have insisted on the right to belong exactly as we are.

This resource is for parents, students, administrators and staff, community members, researchers. It is written to be engaging and action-based. Side notes include definitions so that vocabulary is accessible to multiple audiences without being the bulk of content. The purpose of this publication is to center asset-based humanization. This document includes a broad review of LGBTQ+ civil rights law and evolving cases, population research and limitations of data collection, student survey findings on school climate and safety, education best practices at the classroom, district and state level, and student perspectives from youth across the country, including members of IDRA’s 2022 Youth Advisory Board.

*The phrase, “The category is,” announces themed competitions in queer ballroom culture. This subculture began in 20th century New York City, when Black and Latine LGBTQ+ communities famously began communing to create spaces of art, joy, fashion and dancing in the face of racism, xenophobia and systemic oppression. Together, they birthed ball culture, which has continued to massively influence pop culture in the United States, including Madonna’s 1990 single, “Vogue,” named after an iconic dance created by Black choreographers who were not given due credit.

“Queer” is a word that over many periods of time carried a derogatory connotation. Today, many (typically younger) LGBTQ+ people self-describe as queer. Language shifts and evolves across generations and geographies. Broadly speaking in 2022, the term is not usually considered offensive in public conversation when used as an adjective, rather than a noun (e.g., queer communities, queer students, queer people is well-taken. “Queers” is not).

LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term for a broad constellation of both genders and sexual orientations.

Legal Frameworks: Contextualizing Expanded Notions of Civil Rights

Legal Frameworks: Contextualizing Expanded Notions of Civil Rights

“Darling, I want my gay rights now!”

– Marsha P. Johnson, queer & trans liberation activist

National Context

In the United States, LGBTQ+ rights are increasingly situated on solid legal ground across all dimensions of community life. After decades of activism, queer people gained the legal and long-overdue right to marry in 2013 (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). Likewise, decisions from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to defend LGBTQ+ employees (*Macy v. Holder*, April 2012; *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, 1989) led to the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2020 landmark ruling in *Bostock v. Clayton County Georgia* that sex discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 includes both sexual orientation and gender identity. This case resulted in a nationwide prohibition against firing LGBTQ+ employees on the basis of their queer identities – a right previously not held in half the states. Even in systems as harmful as the prison-industrial complex, rights to gender-affirming care for transgender incarcerated people have been litigated and upheld (*Quine v. Beard*, 2015).

Recently, civil rights advocates have grown increasingly concerned about the state of ethics in the Supreme Court, as decisions to rollback protections will lead to deadly consequences for many communities. As of the writing of this document, the following protections are still in place (Sen, 2022).

K-12 Context

At the school level, the federal civil rights law Title IX currently protects students, from kindergarten through college, against discrimination based on their gender and sexual orientation at schools that receive U.S. Department of Education funds (OCR, August 2021). For example, in the case of Ash Whitaker, a transgender student denied access to boy-designated restrooms and other rights, a federal court ruled that “the school must immediately halt its discriminatory policy of singling Ash out because he is transgender.”

This decision was upheld by the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled unanimously in Ash’s favor under both Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (*Whitaker v. Kenosha Unified School District*, 2017). Ash shared with the New York Times, “Winning this case was so empowering and made me feel like I can actually do something to help other trans youth live authentically” (Fortin, 2018).

Students, families, staff and other leaders should know they have both federal frameworks and

Legal Frameworks: Contextualizing Expanded Notions of Civil Rights

judicial precedent backing action they take to expand equity for students of diverse genders and sexual orientations. As evidenced by case law, commission findings, and recent statutory interpretation by a variety of state, district, and federal entities, LGBTQ+ communities in the United States have legal recourse when their civil rights and equitable access to education, employment, housing, and other resources are threatened (*Bostock v. Clayton County Georgia*; OCR, August 2021; *Whitaker v. Kenosha Unified School District*, 2017).

“There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

– Arundhati Roy, *author*

To Be Young, Queer and Counted

LGBTQ+ Youth Demographics in the United States

Researchers estimate that 7% to 11% of youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. These percentages represent more than 3 million youth between the ages of 8 and 18. Students who are Black, Latine, Asian, Pacific Islander, Indigenous and/or multiracial make up more than half (52%) of LGBTQ+ youth, compared to 39% of LGBTQ+ adults (Kaczkowski, et al., 2022; CDC 2015; CDC 2019; MAP, March 2022; Williams Institute, 2022).

Data show almost 2% of high school students identify as transgender, meaning at least 1.3 million trans youth live in the United States today. However, limitations of the available data point to an incomplete picture, as they are based on the 2010 census, a sample of large urban school districts in only 10 states, and young respondents who feel safe to openly self-report on a survey (MAP, Biden Foundation, & Gender Spectrum, nd).

Tensions in Data Collection

Statistics and data stories about the lives of LGBTQ+ youth reveal that more comprehensive inquiries are sorely needed. For example, CDC questionnaires capturing the LGBTQ+ perspectives of middle and high school youth were administered exclusively in English until the year 2021, when they were first made available in Spanish (YRBSS FAQ, 2021). As the data sets for 2021 are not yet available, we know that our current snapshot of LGBTQ+ youth is limited only to students who could respond in English. Additionally, most survey instruments are administered at the middle and high school levels, largely excluding PK-5 public school environments (CDC, MAP, GLSEN). Psychologists understand that conceptions of gender identity develop in early childhood (APA, 2020) resulting in children who express gender expansive identities well before adolescence.

Where in the country LGBTQ+ youth are concentrated is an open question. We know that more LGBTQ+ adults live in the U.S. South than in any other region – at least 3.6 million spread across Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia – compared to 3 million in the West, 2.1 million in the Midwest, and 2.4 million in the Northeast (MAP & Campaign for Southern Equality, 2020). These same data are not readily available for LGBTQ+ youth (Trevor Project, 2021).

Disaggregated data that welcome nuanced student experiences are also scarce. We know, for instance, that sexual and gender diverse youth in low-income families are at higher risk of being

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pushed out of school. We also know that social prejudices and harmful policies put LGBTQ+ youth with mental or physical disabilities at an increased risk for negative health outcomes (APA, 2020 & cross-citations). However, the literature lacks accessible data sets to understand a fuller range of young LGBTQ+ experiences, including not just the structural obstacles they face, but also the dreams and joys they share. As one young participant in the What's Your Issue? research collective puts it, "We are more than a collection of our struggles" (Torre & Avory, 2022).

Advocates are left to grapple with the question: How many children are missing out on lifesaving school-based support, such as effective non-discrimination policies, books mirroring the diversity of our youngest learners, and truly prepared district staff because they have not yet been counted?

K-12 School Climate: Harm and Healing, Exclusion and Resistance

“My queerness wasn’t an impediment. It opened me up to the world outside of the worlds that I couldn’t even have imagined... That felt and feels like such a gift.”

– Bryan Washington, writer

K-12 School Climate: Harm and Healing, Exclusion and Resistance

Sense of Belonging in Schools

For two decades, the LGBTQ+ organization GLSEN has conducted its National School Climate Survey. In that time, surveyed queer youth have reported both wins and challenges. For example, over the last 20 years, queer students have fought to improve the landscape for themselves and their peers by forming and maintaining gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs), that historically served as protective factors for LGBTQ+ students’ well-being and academic achievement (Kosciw, 2019; 2001).

Providing opportunities for queer youth to lead the way in advocacy and education efforts can promote feelings of self-efficacy for students who are LGBTQ+ and empathy for those who are not. Another respondent observed: “My happiest moment was deconstructing gender with a group of middle schoolers in a program I did about a year ago. I told them how I didn’t feel like a girl or a boy and a lot of them got it. I felt super hopeful about our future!” (Torre & Avory, 2022) Surveyed students with access to gender and sexuality alliances have almost doubled in percentage points, from 31% in 2001 to 62% in 2019 (Kosciw, 2019; 2001).

Experiences of hostility have decreased on some scales from the 2001 flagship survey, when 69% of all LGBTQ+ youth reported feeling unsafe due to their orientation, down almost 10 points to 59% in 2019. Of course, that number is still heartbreakingly high. Beyond orientation, a startling 86% of LGBTQ+ students were still experiencing violence in schools based on a constellation of identities including gender expression and actual or perceived religion, race, ethnicity, and disability (Kosciw, 2019; 2001).

As queer children continue to assert themselves in communities and educational contexts (Torre & Avory, 2022), we see some measures of resistance to their inclusion rising. For example, while only 11% of youth reported feeling unsafe in school because of their gender in 2001, 37% reported this in 2019 (Kosciw, 2019; 2001).

Unfortunately, the percentages only grow when disaggregated by cisgender versus gender expansive youth. GLSEN reports that 84% of transgender students and 52% of nonbinary students feel unsafe at school based on gender, versus their cisgender counterparts at 21% (GLSEN, 2021). “I always say how bullied I am, but no one listens. What do I have to do so people will listen?” (Sadowski, 2021).

K-12 School Climate: Harm and Healing, Exclusion and Resistance

Impacts of Current Events

In 2021, the Trevor Project released an analysis of almost 35,000 LGBTQ+ youth across the country. Southerners comprised the largest share of responses by geographic region at 35% (compared to 26%, 23% and 16% for the West, Midwest and Northeast respectively).

In the analysis, the Trevor Project found that COVID-19 had majorly impacted LGBTQ+ youth. Seventy-two percent of surveyed 13- to 17-year-olds reported that their mental health had been “poor” most or all of the time during the pandemic, and 81% shared that COVID-19 had “made their living situation more stressful.”

Increased tensions at home provide all the more reason for schools to offer spaces of belonging. In the report, 13- to 24-year-olds with access to LGBTQ+-affirming communities had lower rates of attempted suicide. Sadly, suicide attempts by Native, Black, Latinx and multiracial youth were on average almost 11 percentage points higher than those of white, Asian and Pacific Islander youth.

An alarming 67% of Black queer youth and 60% of Asian and Pacific Islander youth had experienced racial and ethnic discrimination during 2020, a particularly fraught year for racial justice in which 94% of all respondents shared that politics had “negatively impacted their mental health.”

Schools can play a pivotal role in supporting queer youth, as 48% of respondents wanted mental health counseling and were not able to access it. White LGBTQ+ youth were on average 37% more likely to secure access to mental healthcare than every other racial-ethnic group (Trevor Project, 2021).

Addressing Institutional Harm

Positive school environments have shown to make the biggest difference in the lives of LGBTQ+ students compared to home, community, and work environments (Aspegren, 2021). As students navigate hinderances to healing, affirmation, and joy, queer professor and teacher educator Dr. Bettina Love asserts that schools have failed historically in responding to the shifting needs of students and that the intersectional barriers they face “cannot be eradicated by tweaking the system” (Love, 2019). Regarding LGBTQ+ students, the “tweaks” schools have tried in the past mostly relate to anti-bullying laws and policies, which exist in 49 states (Rethinking Schools, 2016). Yet the data are clear that schools cannot stop at “stop bullying” (Darnell Pritchard, 2013).

The alienation of queer kids from school communities is not merely happening at the hands of a

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few, cruel schoolyard bullies. It is a systemic problem: from the legally sanctioned silencing of LGBTQ+ voices in the teaching of history, sex education and other content areas, to the well-founded hesitation of queer educators to bring their full selves to work (Gonzalez, 2016; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018), and the missed opportunities of straight and cisgender adults to foster safer school climates (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). What does it take, then, to teach and lead beyond fear?

Queering the Curriculum: Obstacles and Opportunities for Implementation

Queering the Curriculum: Obstacles and Opportunities for Implementation

“[They say] it’s political to put someone like me on a stage. What I think is political is that you’ve never seen anyone like me speak before. What they say is ‘natural’ is that we divide billions of complex souls into one of two categories. What I say is natural is half of flowers are intersex. Let’s talk about what’s actually natural, is diversity – and how foolish is it that we [have to waste our time arguing about] what is?”

– Alok Vaid-Menon, writer & artist

Benefits of LGBTQ+-Inclusive Content

Omission of LGBTQ+ history and experiences in curricula is the most basic form of bias (Moorhead, 2018; Penn, 2022). Nationally, just one in five LGBTQ+ students have indicated they were taught positive representations of LGBTQ+ people, history, or events in school. Creating inclusive, equitable, and culturally sustaining schools that serve every student requires curricula in which students can see themselves in the lessons they are learning (Butler, 2020). Studies show that students are more engaged, perform better, and are less prone to many common risk factors when curriculum is relevant to and inclusive of their lives (Garron & Logan, 2020).

Furthermore, because the lives of students (and all people) are not one dimensional, the history we share and the lessons we teach must be constructed with an eye toward intersectional framing – that is, analyzing the ways in which systems of oppression (i.e., racism, classism, ableism, xenophobia) impact individuals across multiple dimensions in unique and overlapping ways, rather than discussing discrete aspects of identity in “silos” (Skelton, 2021; Crenshaw, 2019; Darnell Pritchard, 2013).

When done particularly well, intentional, contextualized representation across the curriculum can help support students in developing dynamic and robust perceptions of who they are relative to wider society. As one student researcher reflected, “Woman, queer, immigrant, Mexican... how much more powerful can I get in this country?” (Torre & Avory, 2022).

Where schools provide LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum and resources, students are about 30% less likely to hear homophobic remarks and feel unsafe based on sexual orientation. Students are also less likely to hear negative remarks about transgender people, less likely to feel unsafe based on gender expression, and less likely to miss school due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable. In these environments, queer students perform better academically, are more likely to plan on pursuing post-secondary education, feel greater belonging in their school community, and are 76% more likely to report their peers are somewhat or very accepting of LGBTQ+ people (GLSEN, 2021).

Facing Elected Bullies

The benefits of LGBTQ+-inclusion and belonging are clear: from improved mental health outcomes and more positive school climates to higher academic performance. Unfortunately, states like Alabama, Louisiana, and Utah have arcane “no promo homo” laws still on the books,

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that actively prevent educators from doing what is best for kids: using inclusive curricular materials, teaching whole and honest history, speaking openly with students about identity, and promoting a school culture where all learners are affirmed. Some of these laws even require educators to teach that LGBTQ+ people are living in such a way that “is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public” (Lambda Legal, 2022). Meanwhile states such as Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Montana, and Tennessee have recently enacted curriculum censorship bills that restrict LGBTQ+-inclusive lessons (MAP, March 2022).

Across the nation in 2020-21, 40 states considered hostile school climate bills during their legislative sessions that aimed to ban diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) trainings, restroom access, and inclusive sport team policies; roll back gender nondiscrimination protections; and force youth workers to “out” LGBTQ+ students to their parents, even in instances where the student could face familial abuse as a consequence (MAP, March 2022).

Regarding “outing,” the ACLU states: “It is against the law for school officials to disclose a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity to parents or other school staff, even if the student is open about their sexual orientation or gender identity with friends at school. School officials may think they’re doing the right thing but revealing a student’s sexual orientation or gender identity to their parents not only violates the student’s privacy rights, but can open an LGBTQ child to hostility, rejection, and even violence from their parents.” (2022)

States that have anti-bullying legislation on the books yet exclude LGBTQ+ communities from literature, history, and inclusive wellness practices – or worse yet, legislate against them – are creating a paradigm in which not enough students will understand that LGBTQ+ people have contributed across every era in human history and every dimension of community life. This engenders the very atmosphere that allows bullying to go unanswered, which almost every state deems worthy of attention.

In a 2020 analysis, the Movement Advancement Project analyzed LGBTQ+ policies across seven different categories – including LGBTQ+ youth laws – and found the U.S. South had the worst scores of any geographic region (MAP & Campaign for Southern Equality, 2020). On a scale of 0-9, LGBTQ+ youth laws in the South have a policy score of 0.6 compared to the national average of 3.2.

Meanwhile, 93% of queer adult Southerners live in states with negative or low equality scores, meaning these states have the fewest legal protections against discrimination and the highest numbers of religious exemption laws, which provide license to discriminate in healthcare, child welfare, and access to public restrooms. These states are also the only ones passing preemption

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laws explicitly aimed at preventing local governments from protecting residents against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity where state laws fail to do so (MAP & Campaign for Southern Equality, 2020).

In states where legislatures do all they can to stand in the way of best practices, students themselves are leading the way in dreaming expansively and struggling with courage for more, and for better (Gonzalez, 2016). Queer students' tenacity in building their own community networks of resistance through GSAs and other community-based organizations can inspire their teachers to work in similar ways to incorporate intersectional queer experiences throughout their content (Garron & Logan, 2020).

High schoolers in Katy, Texas, for example, are challenging power structures that seek to limit student access to critical information. In 2021, Katy ISD blocked websites with LGBTQ+ suicide prevention resources. Students mobilized to testify at school board meetings and take direct action such as distributing books, mental health resources, and voter registration information (Samuels, 2022; OutSmart, 2022; Zavaleta, 2022). In their op-ed, Texas high school student Cameron Samuels reflected:

Since June 2021, my classmates and I have been organizing to bring attention to the discriminatory actions by school districts like mine. We started an online petition that has gathered support from more than 1,000 community members. We have spoken at school board meetings and met with district officials who promised us they would unblock LGBTQ+ content. So far, they have only delivered us broken promises... We expect the public schools we attend every day to see us as human beings and not a political inconvenience... The Lone Star state is a place of increasing ethnic and cultural diversity where we will continue to stand up for ourselves and for one another.

Another Katy ISD student, Gabrielle Izu, spoke with Texas Tribune about the concerning rise in books bans: "I ignored [my sexuality] for a really long time," she shared, "I think that as a young girl, if a book showed me that this is a life that could be lived, I could have had a lot more peace and coming to terms with bisexuality." Izu shared that her "heart broke" when a queer coming-of-age novel she had deeply resonated with was banned. "What about my story?" she asked (Park, 2022).

Public pressure from the Katy ISD community led the district to unblock multiple websites, though many still remain inaccessible, including The Trevor Project. Cameron and other Katy ISD youth are still petitioning the board of trustees to unlock additional websites and update district non-discrimination policies.

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Attempts to stigmatize, police and preclude LGBTQ+ participation across community landscapes are an age-old weed in the United States social ecosystem, stubbornly resisting uprooting. Early state laws prohibiting “obscene” or “immoral” publications and plays tended to target perceived gender and sexual transgressions, especially same-sex relationships (Edwards, 2022; Crawford-Lackey & Springate, 2020).

Less than 80 years ago, federally sanctioned “lavender purges” resulted in thousands of employees dismissed on grounds of suspected queerness, more than those dismissed for suspected communist ties (Graves, 2022). Only 40 years ago, unfounded institutional bias against LGBTQ+ communities spurred an ongoing AIDS epidemic that has unnecessarily ended over 700,000 U.S. lives across all genders and sexual orientations (CDC, 2016).

Queer-Positive State Standards and Legislation

Some states are taking incremental steps toward equality. Since 2017, for example, Utah, Arizona and Alabama have lifted restrictions on LGBTQ+ curricular content (Ingram, 2019). Others are leading through example to do more than stop the hurling of fists and epithets against young people. California, Colorado*, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington State have all enumerated new standards that name the historical contributions – and roles in contemporary life – of groups historically excluded, including LGBTQ+ communities.

Nevada recently became the eighth state to pass legislation creating inclusive curricular standards, ensuring students are instructed on LGBTQ+ history and contributions to the arts, humanities, and sciences, along with leaders of diverse racial backgrounds, people with disabilities, immigrants, refugees, and religious minorities (A.B. 261, 2021).

While referencing the terms “LGBTQ+,” “gender identity,” or “sexual orientation” in a standard is only a starting point, referencing concepts like these can influence the content educators feel they have a right to include or exclude in classroom dialogue, lesson plans, bookshelves, and more. (Camicia & Zhu, 2019).

A health educator in California reflected that state resources made available to her had radically altered her practice because she knows what she’s using in her classroom has been vetted and published by her district: “Whenever the opportunity comes up, I take every teachable moment. Inclusion of LGBTQ-related topics isn’t a standalone. That makes it look like it’s something that’s

* In Colorado, a committee has been tasked with reviewing the standards and told the state Board of Education last month that it planned to remove references to people in the LGBTQ community from the revised framework for students below the fourth grade following public feedback that questioned the “age appropriateness” of having students learn about their perspectives and experiences. A final decision will be made in November 2022.

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different. It should be part of everyday conversation.” (Sadowski, 2021)

Other states are moving beyond rewriting standards to providing the necessary resources and training to transform a standard on paper into a lived reality in the classroom. For instance, after passing the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act in 2011, California has built out resources for teaching LGBTQ+ history (<https://www.lgbtqhistory.org/>), including lesson plans and professional development. The state also has worked to disseminate gender-inclusive puberty and health education resources through existing organizations, such as Gender Spectrum (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ee/c1f.asp>), and provided multiple access points to anti-bias training aimed at supporting LGBTQ+ youth (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ee/c1e.asp>). Educators both within and outside California can use resources such as One Archives Foundation (<https://www.onearchives.org/about/>), which provides extensive LGBTQ+ history education.

Since the 2011 passage of FAIR, California has made encouraging progress. Still, in 2019, only 31% of students reported being taught LGBTQ+ history in the state (Aspegren, 2021). One student said: “The gay rights movement is not even mentioned during the civil rights chapter in my American History textbook. I’ve yet to read a book in English class with anything more than the implication of homosexuality... with all these people in my life ignoring an issue that is a significant part of me, it is easy to feel that I don’t matter” (Sadowski, 2021). Legislating toward equality and building affirming curricula is a critical first step. Ensuring implementation is still a work in progress.

Pedagogical Strategies for Educators

Where state standards provide no framework on which to hang LGBTQ+ inclusive education, educational professionals can lean into best practices by relying on tried-and-true pedagogical approaches, such as critical literacy (Freire, 2000; Vasquez, 2019), multicultural education and ethnic studies (Banks, 2006; Garron & Logan, 2020), and longstanding literacy tenets, such as using books in the classroom as “mirrors and windows.” Mirrors reflect students’ lives to them, so that they know they are not alone in the world. Windows show them lived experiences outside their own, so that they can develop empathy and critical thinking (Bishop, 1990). These decades-old best practices have always called us to build curricula that respond to the students in front of us. But it can be a heavy lift for educators working without supportive local policies, administrators, or communities to find and implement lessons queer youth deserve.

Case Study: Queer History in the Classroom

Queer history is more and more widely available and steadily gaining traction in both academia

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and the popular media. Globally, from queer African royalty to working class British couples in the 19th and 20th centuries (Hamilton, 2005; Maco, 2021; Mehra, Lemieux, & Stophel, 2019; Manion, 2020), archives of early queer love and expression show authorities were often baffled by these pairings and representation, struggling to determine if their existence broke laws or merely convention (Manion, 2020). Queer women, united in their resistance to the single story of femininity and heterosexuality presented to them, managed to make places to be themselves.

Sometimes they did so together, as in the case of Mary Howe and her “female husband*,” James, who ran the White Horse Tavern in London’s East End for decades (Manion, 2020). At times, queer women’s masculinity was performed very much alone, as was the case in 1920s Nigeria for King Ahebi Ugbabe, a woman who commanded the highest authority of power and challenged notions of gender sans any known legal or romantic partner (Achebe, 2011). Well before relatively modern society wrestled with how to respond to those who defied “norms” of gender and sexuality, we were part of the landscape, from hieroglyphs in Ancient Egyptian pyramids to transgender people who “were integrated members of society, and in some cases, were even revered and celebrated as spiritual leaders or prophets” throughout Thailand, pre-colonized India, and pre-colonized Philippines (Nadal & Scharron-del Rio, 2022).

Gender expansive ways of being in the world have also been part of our U.S. history since before the nation could claim its identity as such. In the pre-colonial United States, at least 65 Native American Nations had their own vocabulary to describe individuals who did not align with binary European gender roles. As early as the 1600s, Virginia court records document the case of Thomas(ine) Hall, a gender non-conforming person who was policed, publicly shamed and threatened with execution (Edwards, 2022; Crawford-Lackey & Springate, 2020; New York Historical Society, 2022).

Despite the risk of criminalization, queer folks kept fighting for their right to exist beyond the binary – as evidenced by the extraordinary life of William Swann Dorsey – a formerly enslaved activist and self-proclaimed “queen of drag” (Joseph, 2020). Dorsey was perhaps the first person in the United States to “take specific legal and political steps to defend the queer community’s right to gather without the threat of criminalization, suppression, or police violence” when he demanded a pardon from President Grover Cleveland after his arrest for holding a drag ball in 1888 (Joseph, 2020).

* A term used throughout Anglo-America for nearly 200 years to define people who defied categorization – those assigned female at birth but who assumed a legal, social, and economic position reserved for men: that of husband (Manion, 2020).

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Similar attempts to silence and condemn such pivotal trans activists as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera have not been successful. Both played key roles in the Stonewall uprising, but they did not stop their work at the close of the riot, going on to found Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) and STAR House, which provided housing for predominately Black and Latine queer youth (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2019). Though their narratives have been nearly lost to history multiple times over, queer communities faced with systemic harm for their race or ethnicity have fought to preserve their legacies through “works of trans memory” (De Kosnik, et al., 2020). It now becomes the work of a much broader community – the teaching community – to preserve and educate about these histories.

LGBTQ+ Resource Databases

Educators looking for support in building out a more inclusive curriculum need not take on the burden of doing original research or constructing lesson plans from the ground up. For example, Learning for Justice offers lesson plans searchable by grade levels K-12; 15 different content areas; lived experiences like race, religion, ability, class, immigration, gender, and sexual identity; as well as domains like diversity, justice, and action, which serve as a road map for anti-bias education (Learning for Justice, nd).

Texts such as *Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ-Inclusive Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom* and the Human Rights Coalition’s *Welcoming Schools* resource provide teachers with the theoretical frameworks, literacy strategies, and book lists necessary to engage even our youngest learners in the complexity and diversity of the larger world (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; HRC, 2022). Studies on implementation of multicultural high school curricula emphasize the importance of building critical intersectional contexts for learners to understand the collective nature of many common, interrelated oppressions and their function throughout history in U.S. society (Wernick, et al, 2021).

“We head home:
through the gloss of
rain / or weight / of
snow, or the plum
blush of dusk, but /
always – home... / all
of / us –/ facing the
stars / hope – a new
constellation / waiting
for us to map it, /
waiting for us to
name it – together.”

– Richard Blanco, poet

Creating District-Wide Policies

Increasing Staff Efficacy for Queer Student Support

For those brave enough to stand firm in the data and human rights, an expanding wealth of resources, curricular guides, and professional development exist to support school districts. Guides in best practice cover everything from making local policies more inclusive, to cultivating a classroom culture where LGBTQ+ youth can thrive to working with families to build a stronger school community, including those who are as-of-yet unaccepting (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2018).

In 2016, only one in three LGBTQ+ youth found their home to be affirming. Given that LGBTQ+ youth who have at least one affirming and accepting adult in their lives are 40% less likely to attempt suicide (The Trevor Project, 2021), it is critical that educators working toward culturally sustaining practices do not stop at their classroom library shelves (Penn, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Every school I have been to, there has always been one or two teachers I really trusted. Like, my drama teacher in high school was like that, and I knew I could always talk to her. So, I think there is usually – and I know this is probably for every kid – there is always that one teacher in high school or middle school that they feel they could open up to. I think that’s kind of important. It makes you want to go to school. (Jessie in Sadowski, 2021)

Surveys indicate that educators feel discomfort incorporating LGBTQ+ topics in part due to a lack of support from both administrators and communities (Aspegren, 2021). A survey of nearly 2,500 teachers and students nationwide also found that teachers were less comfortable intervening with bullying of LGBTQ+ students than incidents based on race, ability and religion.

While 83% of these educators reported they should provide a safe environment for queer students, only half had taken action to do so (Minero, 2018). To support inclusive pedagogy and interventions, administrative teams must themselves be vocal, explicit and specific in their support for LGBTQ+ inclusive resources, as well as their opposition to biased actions from faculty, staff, students, and the wider community (Meyer, et al., 2019).

Students in districts with LGBTQ+ inclusive policies experience lower rates of violence based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression (Butler, 2020; Advancement Project, et al., 2012), so district leaders must make it clear that LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum resources have a home on campus while transphobic and homophobic sentiments do not.

Creating District-Wide Policies

Policies should be posted and easily accessible both online and in person and compel staff to intervene in behavior that targets queer students (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2018).

For classroom teachers to move beyond a fear of backlash, school and district leadership must be equally compelled to model such interventions. Workshops for faculty and staff should include scenarios and roleplay where educators can practice interrupting problematic language and behaviors (Butler, 2020) together with their administrators. Additionally, it is too often the case that professional development around queer issues assume there are no queer educators in attendance and stop at a “Queer 101” introduction rather than looking to build background knowledge for teachers about queer history, movements, and contributions.

Mental and Physical Well-Being

In an era in which students across all identity spectrums have been subjected to the extraordinary circumstances of growing and learning in a pandemic, we have a demand and an opportunity to recenter student mental health, well-being, and safety. Schools can reallocate funds for punitive discipline and policing to preventative resources, such as an appropriate ratio of well-trained and culturally responsive guidance counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses available to help any student navigating physical, mental, or emotional health stressors (Advancement Project, et al., 2012).

Where school-based resources currently lack specificity around LGBTQ+ youth support, schools should consult community organizations well-versed in offering referrals and guidance (Butler, 2020) while working to grow their own capacity through relevant professional development and investment in queer-specific resources.

To prevent students from seeking potentially inaccurate or age-inappropriate sources, schools should cover LGBTQ+ relevant topics in sex education and provide inclusive medical information. LGBTQ+ youth, especially students of color, need shame-free, medically accurate, and culturally responsive education about their health (Butler, 2020).

Multiple studies have confirmed that access to gender-affirming care is one of the safest and most critical supports gender expansive youth can receive (HHS OASH, 2022). In the case that a student is experiencing a health issue beyond the capacity of school-based support services, they should be referred to medical or mental health care that will be supportive of their LGBTQ+ identity (Butler, 2020).

Creating District-Wide Policies

Gender Expression

Research shows that affirming transgender and nonbinary youth by using their pronouns can be a life-saving action (Trevor Project, 2021). Best practices suggest school staff confidentially survey all youth about the ways they would like to be addressed in one-on-ones in comparison to groups or in communication with the adults raising them, as varying audiences may determine the level of safety youth feel to express themselves (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2018).

Additionally, school districts can (and in certain cases, are legally required to) promote safety for LGBTQ+ students by ensuring dress code policies regarding hair, makeup, and shaving are the same for students of all genders (Butler, 2020; Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020). In terms of school infrastructure, ensuring access to single-occupancy bathrooms for any student to use (Butler, 2020) is an inclusive practice as long as this does not mean certain students are obligated to use them.

Part of creating a welcoming school environment is to provide resources for any student to use if they are uncomfortable changing in or using a gender-specific space (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2018). Beyond school walls, all students should be allowed to attend field trips, dances, and other district events regardless of their gender expression or that of their date when they satisfy all other rules (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2018).

Conclusion: A Call to Action

“May the tide / that
is entering even now
/ the lip of our
understanding / carry
you out / beyond the
face of fear / may
you kiss / the wind
then turn from it /
certain that it will /
love your back / may
you / open your eyes
to water / water
waving forever / and
may you in your
innocence / sail
through this to that.”

– Lucille Clifton, poet

Conclusion: A Call to Action

In his education research, Dr. Ed Brockenborough illuminates the “disheartening link in the imaginary in this country between queer students of color and tragic endings” (2015). While educational discourses on youth in crisis have raised public awareness of systemic issues, they can also reproduce deficit-based popular narratives that overlook “young people’s agency to negotiate the barriers to their... success” (Brockenborough, 2015). When advocating for equity, we can both acknowledge the harsh realities queer youth face in schools and advance the counternarrative that students are building lives with space for freedom and joy.

Headlines are real, and they are dispiriting. Still, since the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized marriage across the country, opinion polls showing support for LGBTQ+ marriage have trended consistently upward, with a recent high reaching 70%, which is up from 27% when Gallup first asked the question in 1996. Significantly, Republican support also reached a majority (55%) in 2021 (McCarthy, 2021).

While the past several years have seen a serious uptick in legislatures working to enact exclusionary state policies toward queer youth, statutes protecting and affirming LGBTQ+ students in public schools “remain more common than those that exclude them.” From 2006 to 2021, 121 affirming policies were enacted across 26 states, including anti-bullying regulations that specifically enumerate protections for LGBTQ+ students, encourage state or district policies and professional development to support queer kids, and legislative mandates for culturally inclusive educational materials with references to LGBTQ+ communities (Temkin, et al., 2022).

As courts and legislatures do their slow-moving work toward and away from inclusion, adults on the ground need not wait to do what is just for the students in front of them. We know what works. Students need books in their hands that represent both who they and their community members are. Each student deserves to learn full histories reflective of every race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, orientation, and experience of disability, communities from every walk of life who have made today’s world possible.

We know youth need LGBTQ+ inclusive health and sex education, including more and higher quality access to affirming mental health practices and practitioners. We know it is paramount for teachers, administrators, and every adult in and out of school to interrupt harmful bias and use inclusive language to be the safe and supportive mentors youth can count on. Across history, queer youth have and will continue creating beautiful, protective, and supportive spaces for each other, with or without permission.

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