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Correcting The Lack of Representation and Support for LGBTQ Students in School

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Correcting The Lack of Representation and Support for LGBTQ Students in School

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Dedication

To my students: may you always know how much you mean to me and to this world. Thank you for being you.

Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to all of my professors who have helped me on this journey. Their guidance, patience, and dedication to their work has helped me become a more critically conscious citizen. Because of them, I have not only been able to more fully develop and expand upon my educational philosophy, but I feel equipped and empowered to bring these teachings into my classroom. I have wanted to be a teacher since before I can remember, and any chance I have to grow my love of education is one that I am thankful for.

To my classmates, thank you for your unwavering friendship and support over these last two and a half years. When I needed to talk, you were always there to listen, and when I needed advice, you always knew what to say. I am inspired by the work you have done and will continue to do, and I am grateful for all I have learned from you! Each of you makes a difference in this world, and my life is richer for having you in it.

Finally, thank you to my family for always being there for me. From playing "school" with me in the basement and letting me help you grade papers to helping me set up my first classroom and giving me advice on my lessons, you have fostered my love of learning and teaching my whole life long. I am a better person and teacher because of you, and I love you all very much.

Abstract

While some progress has been made toward the inclusion of previously excluded historically marginalized communities from school curricula, there remains a notable absence of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual+ (LGBTQIA+) community. Specifically, the LGBTQIA+ community is considered controversial to address in schools because anything outside of the heterosexual, cisgender norm conflicts with some people's religious and political beliefs. Though school administrators may insist that the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ content in schools is in violation of public schools' duty to remain neutral, the purposeful omission of such is a political act in itself.

This program will emphasize the obligation schools have to provide safety and support for LGBTQIA+ students. Through the implementations of inclusive curricula, clubs such as Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs), and comprehensive bullying policies, schools can actively work to alleviate and even prevent gender- and sexual orientation-based bullying. With fewer instances of bullying and more positive support and representation, LGBTQIA+ students will feel safer, ultimately resulting in higher achievement and fewer instances of suicide. The goal of this program is to garner the support of administrators, community members, and educators alike, so that schools can become places where all students can thrive.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Positionality

This Apple Didn't Fall Far From the Tree

Worksheets, stickers, old class rosters. These were the things that brought my seven-year-old self all the joy in the world. From the time I was a little kid, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. My own teachers would give me all of their old supplies to take home and play with, and my favorite birthday and Christmas gifts were those that one could find in a back-to-school aisle. I especially loved getting fresh chalk for my chalkboard. Sure, I loved a fresh set of paints, a piping bag for cake decorating, and new hair supplies as well, but beyond my fun hobbies, there was one thing I always felt a calling to: teaching.

Both of my parents made their careers as special education teachers in the School District of Philadelphia. I spent my entire childhood going to work with my mom on my days off from school. When I was young, I would mostly just occupy myself in her classroom. However, as I got older, other teachers would let me give spelling tests, and eventually, I was working with small groups of kids on reading and writing. Sometimes I look back and wonder why I chose to wake up early on my days off of school instead of staying home with my siblings, but I remember loving every minute of it and knowing that that was, without a doubt, what I wanted to do when I grew up.

One of the reasons I was able to go to my mom's work at a public school was because I attended a Catholic school, which meant I had some days off that she did not. I attended St. Philip Neri for nine years and Archbishop Carroll High School for four. Until I began teaching at a public school in 2016, I was convinced that I would send my own kids to Catholic school

one day. And quite honestly, I thought I might teach in one as well. Despite the strict rules, I still hold such fond memories, especially of grade school. However, when I began my teaching career, I started to more critically analyze some of the ways in which Catholic school no longer aligned with my educational philosophies. I realized that I would want my own children to have the freedom to express themselves in ways that Catholic school did not permit: hairstyles, jewelry, nail polish (I still remember being sent to the restroom in eighth grade to take mine off).

I also thought that public schools would allow for a more diverse and inclusive education, one that my parents did their best to instill in my siblings and me at home. Though being gay or transgender is still widely not accepted in many faiths, my parents did not allow us to think this way. So, I considered if I had a child who was gay and how they would feel being in a Catholic school-- not being accepted in the curriculum and possibly even being told that the way they were born was a sin. I considered how I, as a Catholic school teacher, would be able to serve my LGBTQIA+ students in a setting that did not support them. But my desire for my students and future children was-- and is-- that they could have the freedom to be who they were and to have a diverse and expansive education. That they could have open conversations about social and political views that would not be permitted in a Catholic school and that as a teacher, I would be able to offer guidance in these discussions. I just assumed that this could happen in any public school. But I was wrong.

School: An Inclusive Place For All… Right?

"In this crazy and sometimes scary time we live in, it's so important that we listen to each other with an open heart and open mind. You can change someone's mind by sharing your story. You can make someone's day by getting them to laugh. But we can change someone's life by showing them compassion."- Adam Rippon.

I came across these words one weekend in the spring of 2018. As I browsed through the internet, a news headline sparked my interest: Adam Rippon Receives Human Rights Campaign

Visibility Award. Olympic figure skater and bronze medalist, Adam Rippon, had received this award for the representation he brought to the LGBTQ+ community as one of the first two openly gay Olympians during the 2018 Winter Games. Being a fan of his, I watched his speech and was so moved by his words. He said, "There may be people in your life who may not like you for who you are and they may not like what you have to say. There may be people who come into your life just to tell you that they hope you fail. Be kind to them" (Human Rights Campaign, 2018) I was so touched by his empowering messages to be yourself and show compassion toward others, and I felt an immediate connection to the messages I wanted my students to hear. I sent the speech to my team at school, thinking it would make for an important and impactful anti-bullying lesson, which we then conducted every other Monday.

While discussing the speech in our team meeting a few days later, one teacher expressed that he loved the speech but was not sure how the parents in our community would react. Another teacher added on that she was very uncomfortable with showing the speech and leading a follow-up discussion. She stated that she would not do it. The team agreed that, with so many strong feelings, we should get administration's approval before showing the speech. We forwarded the video and lesson plan along, and received a message back that we would not be permitted to show it.

Confused, I scheduled a meeting with a school administrator to ask why we were not allowed to show the video. He told me that it was too controversial and that it was not middle school appropriate. I questioned how a message about kindness and empathy could not be appropriate for middle school students, and after some discussion, he admitted that we could not show the video because the speaker is gay. He said that our parents would disapprove of their

children watching the speech and would send him their complaints. "Does that make sense?" he asked me. "No," I replied. "I'm not sure why they would complain."

Having only been at the school for a short time, I did not know that much of our district was very conservative. Truthfully, having gone to Catholic school for thirteen years, I naively assumed that public schools were places where you could talk and learn about all of the things that I was never exposed to in school. After asking more questions about why we were not permitted to show the video, I was finally told that I could find a video with the same message as long as the person delivering it was not gay. He asked again if that make sense. I told him again that it didn't.

How is a public institution that receives federal funding allowed to discriminate against LGBTQ students? How could an inspiring speech about kindness and empathy be so controversial? Just that year, our staff had attended a professional development to learn about the LGBTQIA+ community in order to better support a transgender student at our school. Why were we not permitted to bring these teachings into the classroom? I was shaken, confused, and discouraged. But I was not ready to give up.

Just one day later, a student named "Daniel" made remarks in my classroom about how there are only two genders and there cannot be any more. Boy or girl. That's it. I later learned that this stemmed from an interaction he had with a gender nonconforming peer. Since we had received training on this topic earlier in the year, I decided to use the opportunity as a teachable moment. I explained to my class that some people identify as a boy, some as a girl, some as both, and some as neither. I taught them about the difference between sex and gender and that sometimes those two things don't always match. Daniel continued to argue that this was wrong, at which point I encouraged him to keep an open mind and to recognize that people can express

themselves in all kinds of ways. The only person who can determine their identity is themself. I learned the following day that Daniel interpreted my comments as an attack on his beliefs. He told his peers that I called him ignorant. And just two days after meeting about the speech, I was called back into my administrator's office.

I was asked to explain what happened and was assured that I was not in trouble for what I had done. The administrator had met with Daniel the day before and told him that he should not do that anymore. Over the next six weeks, until the end of the school year, Daniel continued anyway, and even used homophobic slurs toward his classmate. I, of course, kept my mouth shut.

The thing is, my experience is not unique. Public schools across the country grapple with doing what they know is best for kids while still considering community opinion. My district is fortunate to have such active and involved parents, and so community input becomes a cornerstone in decision-making. But as Dawkins says about our children, "The important point is that it is *their* privilege to decide what they shall think, and not their parents' privilege to impose it by *force majeure*" (Dawkins, 2008, p. 367). Just as educators should not impose a single theory or belief on their students, parents and guardians should not dictate what children are exposed to in school. The exclusion of the LGBTQ community may be one family's practice, but it should not determine the status quo for a district whose job is to serve all students, including LGBTQ+ students.

As the weeks went on, I kept thinking about the speech. I thought about the messages Adam Rippon shared. I thought about how many kids would have begun to accept their classmates, or even themselves, had they heard his words. I thought about how many kids would have been encouraged to know that-- even if their peers continued to mistreat them-- their

teachers would not allow it. That we would be there to support them. I thought about all of the kids who needed to hear Adam's message:

> To all the young kids out there who may come across this speech online: whether you are gay, straight, bi, trans, or still on a journey of self-discovery; whether you are white, black, or any color in between; there is something you need to know and something we can all be reminded of: You are smarter than you think. You hold more strength than you may ever know. You are powerful. No matter where you have come from or where you are going to, there is someone who looks up to you, and they will find inspiration in your strength of just being yourself.

And I knew that, no matter what, I would continue to work toward a safer and more inclusive place for *all* of our students.

Personal Positionality

Takacs (2003) argues, "Few things are more difficult than to see outside the bounds of your own perspective" (p. 27). Growing up, I had very few opportunities to see beyond these bounds in my life. I grew up a white, Catholic, middle-class, straight, cisgender female surrounded by a primarily white, Catholic, middle-class environment. I am the youngest of three children with an incredible mom and dad. My siblings and I may not have had the latest gadgets and designer brands that some of our friends had, but we always had a roof over our heads and food on the table. We performed in the school musicals, played sports and instruments, and went down the shore for a week every summer. It was just about the most average life one could imagine.

According to Takacs (2003), our positionality is formed from our experiences, and I have struggled to determine how my experiences, or lack thereof, have led me here. I did not have a vastly diverse upbringing. So maybe my views come not from being directly impacted by a diverse world, but by the fact that I grew up with privilege in areas I did not even understand as a child. I had two parents who raised their kids to give whenever possible and to be kind toward

and accepting of everyone. And, I had the Golden Rule: "Treat others the way you want to be treated."

Recently, I reposted an image on social media which read: "Trans inclusive feminism understands the patriarchy is the defining of the gender binary and the policing of everyone into gender norms" (Vaid-Menon, 2020). My friend replied to my post writing, "I still don't know how you possibly went to a Catholic school." I told him that, as a very concrete thinker, I took the words "God loves everyone" pretty literally. If God made us each in His image, then who are we to determine who is more or less deserving of love and acceptance? We must always be open to others' perspectives.

As argued by Takacs (2003), "When you listen to others' perspectives, you may question your assumptions and lower the barriers to be able to reach consensus" (p. 32). Many public schools in America still discriminate against LGBTQ+ students by not providing, or allowing the teachers to provide, representation of LGBTQ people in our curricula and classrooms. Administrators will say that "It's our job as a public school to remain neutral." But if we remain neutral, a concept which will be further explored in Chapter Three, then how will we ever understand others' perspectives? If my parochial grade school and high school could "remain neutral", then we, as a public school, need to make sure that we are actively exposing our kids to as much diversity as possible. Public schools must begin to lower their barriers, truly listen to the concerns of their students, and work to find a consensus amongst all of the varying opinions that contribute to the workings of a school district. Educators must begin to question their assumptions so that we can teach our students to question theirs.

A Look Ahead

In order to more fully understand the issues that LGBTQIA+ students face in school, we must first look at how public schools operate and the potential they have to be truly democratic. As we will explore in Chapter Three, a democratic education would lead to a less authoritarian classroom environment and one in which student voice matters. When students are seen as whole and valued persons, then their education becomes more meaningful, and we learn to cater to their needs. We can detach ourselves from the pressures and expectations of the surrounding world and focus on what matter most: our students.

In the second section of Chapter Three, I will provide a history of gender norms and the LGBTQ community in education. While many terms seem new to our vocabularies, the concepts are far from that. Gender and sexuality have been at the helm of education for centuries. They have had many impacts on education and on our students, which will be detailed in section three. As we examine the statistics of how a lack of support and representation of the LGBTQIA+ community affects our students today, we become increasingly aware of the dire need for change. In section four, we will look at the positive impact's representation has on *all* students and work to move toward a more inclusive future in education.

Chapter 2

Thematic Concern, Conceptual Framework, and Definitions

THEMATIC CONCERN:

My thematic concern focuses on the need for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in schools. LGBTQ+ students are at greater risk for suicide and mental health issues than their heterosexual and cisgender peers, and lack of support and representation are contributing to these outcomes. Schools must work to create safe, supportive spaces for all students. We can do this through the implementation of Gender & Sexuality Alliances, comprehensive bullying policies, and inclusive curricula. My goal is to work with my administration, community members, and staff to bring these supports to my school district.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

1. What is the purpose of a democratic education, and how does it necessitate the inclusion of LGBTQ+ students in school curricula, extra-curricular activities, and policies?
2. What is the history of LGBTQ and gender discrimination in education?
3. How are LGBTQ students being affected by lack of representation and support in schools? What are the obstacles to realizing a fully-inclusive educational environment?
4. What can we do to create safe, inclusive schools for LGBTQ students? What impacts could these implementations have on all of our students?

DEFINITIONS:

Constitutive:

Chosen name	A name that someone chooses to use in full replacement of their legal name GLSEN (2019)
Cisgender	A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020).
Effeminate	Having feminine qualities untypical of a man : not manly in appearance or manner (*Merriam-Webster*, 2020)
Gender	Refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as the norms, roles and relationships that exist between them. Gender expectations vary between cultures and can change over time (*Gender and Health*, n.d.). *A common misconception is that there are only two genders; however, gender is a wide and fluid spectrum. In this paper, gender is understood exist outside of the binary of man and woman.
Gender expression	External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
Gender fluid	A person who does not identify with a single fixed gender or has a fluid or unfixed gender identity (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
Gender identity	One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity

	can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
Gender nonconforming	A broad term referring to people who do not behave in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender, or whose gender expression does not fit neatly into a category (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
Heteronormative	Of, relating to, or based on the attitude that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality (*Merriam-Webster*, 2020)
Non-binary	An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
Sexual orientation	An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
LGBTQIA+	An acronym for sexual orientations and gender identities other than cisgender and heterosexual: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual
a. Lesbian	A woman who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to other women. Women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
b. Gay	A person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to members of the same gender. Men, women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
c. Bisexual/Bi	A person emotionally, romantically or

	sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree. Sometimes used interchangeably with pansexual (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
d. Transgender/Trans	An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
e. Queer	A term people often use to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Queer is often used as a catch-all to include many people, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or folks who have non-binary or genderexpansive identities. This term was previously used as a slur, but has been reclaimed by many parts of the LGBTQ movement (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
f. Questioning	A term used to describe people who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
g. Intersex	Intersex people are born with a variety of differences in their sex traits and reproductive anatomy. There is a wide variety of difference among intersex variations, including differences in genitalia, chromosomes, gonads, internal sex organs, hormone production, hormone response, and/or secondary sex traits (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)
h. Asexual	The lack of a sexual attraction or desire for other people (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)

i. + **i. Pansexual**	There are many other identifications within this community - Describes someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to people of any gender though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree. Sometimes used interchangeably with bisexual (*Human Rights Campaign*, 2020)

Operative:
For the purpose of this paper, the following terms are defined as:

Gender norms	The social construct of gender aligning with the sex someone was assigned at birth
Curriculum	Materials or resources to supplement the curriculum in place at any school. In many places, curricula are given to teachers or must be Board-approved. Whole curricula may not be able to be changed with the implementation of this program.
LGBTQIA+, LGBTQ+, LGBTQ	These terms are used interchangeably. Anything that includes fewer letters is used directly from a source and may indicate that only that population (i.e. LG) was studied or that some communities may not yet have been recognized in the acronym.

Chapter 3

The Narrative

Philosophical Positionality

As an undergraduate student majoring in Education, I had to determine my educational philosophy. I wrote that I believed in "guiding my students in developing the tools they need to grow and succeed." I have always held that my role as an educator was not to give my students the answers, but rather to give them what they needed to discover the answers on their own. Now, as a graduate student, I have found that I not only have this responsibility to guide my students, but to uphold the purpose of democracy in education.

In order for education to be truly democratic, students must be involved in the process. This means that to deny our students exposure to literature, history, or any other content is to determine for them what they should find value in while excluding their input and oppressing their opportunities to grow. We must be able to provide our students with a diverse and inclusive education from which they can establish their own sets of values and opinions. We must be diligent about including the LGBTQ+ community in our teachings, even if the population we serve comes with its own opposing views. In 1776, Thomas Jefferson penned the words "All men are created equal" into our Declaration of Independence. We must live his words every day in the way we serve our students: by treating, supporting, and including them *all* equally.

In addition to recognizing our responsibility to serve all students according to the freedoms they inherit in this country, we must also recognize that, by law, students are required to be in school. For example, all children in Pennsylvania must attend school from ages six through seventeen ("State Education Reforms (SER)," n.d.). If all of those children from all of

those different backgrounds are required to be in school, then they deserve an education that provides them opportunities to see themselves and the world around them in the curriculum. In her essay "Curriculum as Window and Mirror", Emily Style (1988) explains that education must provide a mirror of oneself as well as a window into others' worlds. Style (1988) states:

> Traditionally, American education has been more comfortable focusing on similarities. Despite our democratic rhetoric, differences have made us uncomfortable. In fact, there are still American educators who pride themselves on being "color-blind," thinking that ignoring "accidental" differences of race or gender or region or class creates the best classroom climate. Promoting such partial seeing is highly problematic for the creation of curriculum which will serve all students adequately (para. 23).

Though this essay was published in 1988, the concept is still true today. I, myself, have heard educators proclaim that they did not "see color" in regard to the one Black student in their class. This student already had to look around his classroom and see no one else like him, and now, his own teachers did not even see him. A demand to be in school should be accompanied by a demand for all children to be seen and for the curriculum to represent them.

Furthermore, if education is to remain compulsory for children in the United States, then the ones required to be there should have a say in what they learn. If a student wants to discuss a certain topic outside of the set guidelines of the curriculum, then that student should be able to do so. And the teacher should be able to help facilitate that conversation without fear of being called "too political" in the classroom or being accused of indoctrinating their students--common rhetoric used toward public school teachers. By excluding our students' opinions from the education which they are required to learn, we are further oppressing them and enforcing the notion that they do not matter.

How Oppression Hinders a Democratic Education

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2000) opens the door to explore the dangers of maintaining oppression and what must be done to break the cycle. If this process were not

challenging enough, it becomes all the more difficult when the oppressors are either unaware of their oppression, or, in becoming aware, do not make strides to change their actions or attitudes. "Discovering himself to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed" (Freire, 2000, p. 49). I believe that many teachers would feel distress if they were aware of the harm they were causing by dehumanizing their students and considering them unequal. However, the question remains: would this be enough to convince them to change their behavior and their language surrounding their views of their students? Would this be enough to invite students in and consider them equal contributors to their own education-- to assist them in their emancipation from a system that says they are less valued than others? In explaining how the oppressed must be the liberators of their own oppression, Freire (2000) writes:

> They call themselves ignorant and say the "professor" is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen.... Almost never do they realize that they, too, "know things" they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men. Given the circumstances which have produced their duality, it is only natural that they distrust themselves (p. 63).

It is hard to tell sometimes if students believe that they are these "ignorant" beings whose role is to absorb the wisdom of the adult or if they know this is not true but lack the means or motivation to stand up to their oppressors. What I do know is that even if students do try to stand up for themselves, teachers see this as rude and defiant behavior. If I want to be heard-- truly heard-- by those in authority over me, and if I despise the feeling of being oppressed, why would I then turn around and do that to my students? If I want my students to be the change-makers and the ones who are not afraid to stand up for what they believe-- even if it means facing their oppressors-- then I must be willing to give them the tools they need and to let them 'practice' on me. I must be willing to let down my guard and see my students as my equal.

I encourage my students to question why I do certain things, to dispute their grades, or to suggest alternatives to my ideas. And whenever possible, I affirm their actions by making the changes. At twelve and thirteen years old, my students need to know that they are heard and that their voices matter. If we begin preparing our children at a young age to free themselves of oppression, then we give them a fighting chance to stand against oppression as adults. And in the best case, we give them the skill set to know how to be effective leaders without being oppressors, themselves.

By masking the oppression our students face, we risk leading them to irreparable harm. As Freire (2000) suggested, "As long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically 'accept' their exploitation" (p. 64). Freire (2000) continues by explaining that this unawareness leads to a "passive and alienated" reaction "when confronted with the necessity to struggle for their freedom and self-affirmation" (p. 64). If our students do not come to recognize their oppression, they cannot take responsibility for ending it. They may not understand the significance of the molding and shaping that is taking place on their brains. And so the cycle of oppression will continue. That said, kids-- especially young adolescents-- have a natural rebellion inside. They will push their limits. "Little by little… they tend to try out forms of rebellious action" to see just how much they can get away with (Freire, 2000, p.64). At twelve years old, those kids are looked at as the "trouble-makers". We envision them making poor choices in life and running into problems with the law. However, this is democracy at work. They are using the tools they need to develop their own viewpoints and not merely comply without understand why. And we educators have the ability to empower these students to use that energy for good: to become the liberators of their own oppression.

Student Participation in the Curriculum

Assisting our students in their liberation means confronting what we thought we knew or believed. We must now be willing to see beyond the scope of our own little bubbles and expose our students to content that we, ourselves, may not be comfortable with. We can do this by inviting our students into the curriculum process. For example, though a teacher may not *choose* to include the LGBTQ+ community in their teachings, be it a personal belief or a topic in which they are not well-versed, they should not dismiss a student's desire to learn about it. Bertrand Russel, as quoted in Chomsky and Macedo (2004), helps us realize that our goal should be "to help create 'wise citizens of a free community'" (p. 38). In order for this to happen, teachers, too, must be willing to part ways with our authoritarian personalities and take part in a democracy in which students have a say in what they learn. By not considering our students as an equal part in the formation of their education, we are complicit, and arguably active, in their oppression.

In a democratic society, free from oppression and encouraging of students' participation in creating the curriculum, they could learn not only about topics that are relevant to them, but also about the importance of having autonomy in their lives. When teachers become involved in this process, we can provide countless opportunities for our students. By doing so, we could also have a greater chance of diversifying the curriculum, as students would be able to bring their own backgrounds to the table. For example, if students could suggest whole-class reads, we could look at LGBTQ+ titles such as Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* and Dashka Slater's *The 57 Bus*, which I see many of my students reading at school but could never currently be a part of our curriculum. Additionally, teachers would be able to bring in real-world issues that matter to our students to help them better understand the importance of acceptance. By shifting the classroom authority and bringing in more of this diversity and

representation, we could move toward a more inclusive environment. According to Mui, as cited in Education Dive (2018):

> We've found in our research and practices that LGBTQ curriculum can benefit all students by exposing them to more inclusive and accurate accounts of history… It also helps them have a better understanding of diversity and encourages them to question stereotypes. (para. 5)

These stereotypes are perpetuated when we remain ignorant and fail (or refuse) to give our students the opportunity to learn about various and diverse backgrounds.

According to Amy Gutmann (1999), schools should embody themes of *non-repression* and *non-discrimination*. If we do not expose our children to various backgrounds and ways of life, then we are repressing them from being able to form their own opinions. Education must also be non-discriminatory as to ensure that schools not only teach diverse material, but also encourage kids to be inclusive and accepting of people with backgrounds and lifestyles different from their own. So, while we may not have a pre-planned notion of how to incorporate all diverse backgrounds in the classroom just yet, if an inspiring speech about kindness and empathy shows up on the internet one day and a teacher wants to show it to her students, she should not be denied the opportunity to show the speech simply because the speaker is gay.

In making the curriculum-writing process a collaboration between teachers and students, the classroom can become dialogical. According to Freire (2000), "Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (p. 88). He goes on to explain that "dialogue cannot occur between… those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them" (Freire & Macedo, 2000, p. 88). This is to say that true dialogue cannot take place between the oppressors and their oppressed. Therefore, teachers and students must take equal part in the classroom dialogue. Both parties are responsible for bringing content to the conversation and for learning from each other.

Learning from each other is a concept that hardly existed when I was a student-- at least not to my teachers. And I still see evidence of this today. Students have become dependent on an authoritarian style of teaching. This is not to say that my students have not voiced their dislike of homework and tests or that they do not take advantage of the flexible seating in my classroom. They enjoy those freedoms. But overall, they still crave structure and direction. They often seem surprised when I do not assign seats. I ask them to write a paragraph and they immediately ask me how many sentences it has to be. I ask them to generate ideas on a topic, and they come up empty because they are just waiting to be told the answer. They are used to the teacher being "in charge". They are losing the ability to think for themselves. They are making decisions without even knowing why.

For example, every morning, I ask my students how they are. One year, I experimented with documenting their responses through morning check-ins. When they entered the room, they filled out a slip of paper which asks questions about what is going well, what they are struggling with, some goals they want to set for themselves, etc. One day, a student noted that a goal of his was to not get in trouble. I asked how he planned to accomplish this, and he responded that he wouldn't go against what the teachers asked him to do. I immediately cringed inside. This is yet another example of kids thinking that their primary job is to obey authority.

I took the opportunity to explain to him that that's not all that "good behavior" looks like and assured him that if he ever felt like I did him wrong, I would hope that he would tell me. I believe this speaks to Freire's (2000) point that "The climate of respect that is born of just, serious, humble, and generous relationships, in which both the authority of the teacher and the freedom of the students are ethically grounded, is what converts pedagogical space into authentic educational experience" (p. 86). I have seen so many teachers assert their authority through

screaming and demanding orders. I am certainly not innocent in this-- I know there are times that I unjustly overreact or judge a situation before I have all of the facts. I just want my students to know that if I do this, they have the right to respectfully defend themselves. As Freire (2000) argued, "It is in my concrete respect for the right to question, to doubt, and to criticize that I bear witness to what I believe and speak" (p. 89). The same goes for my students.

Dialogical pedagogy not only promotes autonomy on the part of the students, where they take ownership for what they learn, but helps children to learn how to share their ideas-- be they in agreement or not with their peers' or even teachers'-- in ways that encourage respect and inclusion. Freire (2000) tells us that "dialogue cannot exist without humility" (p. 90) and that we must eliminate ignorance and any perception that we are members "of the in-group" (p. 90). When our kids see each other as equals, then no opinion is "better" and no belief is any more "correct" than another. Everyone comes to the table with value and worth, for Freire (2000) we cannot have dialogue without it.

The History of LGBTQ and Gender Perception in Education

The battle for equal rights for LGBTQ individuals has been a long one, especially in the educational/academic setting. In the early 1800s, the public feared what having no male teachers would do to young boys' *gender development*, and schools were diligent about only hiring teachers who adhered to societal gender norms (Wimberly, 2015). By doing so, they hoped to set the example for students to see the way they should be: married, heterosexual men, and single women who resigned upon marriage.

In the early 1900s, male teachers grappled with society's views of men doing *women's work*, and vowed to leave the profession if women began to receive equal pay (Blount, 2006). Through the middle of the century, discrimination intensified as educators lost their jobs and

teaching credentials if they were found to be gay. Despite the emergence of public activism, most people supporting such issues in education kept quiet, as did educators themselves. Such was the case for many teachers and professors in Florida when an investigative committee with a mission to link Communism and homosexuality ousted educators across the state. Their years of work tarnished the careers and reputations of many.

As LGBTQ activist groups became more prominent and more vocal, particularly following the Stonewall riots, students joined the fight by creating Gay-Straight Alliances/Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) at their schools. Though schools across the country tried to deny these children their rights, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) defended them time and time again. And although some states still promote anti-LGBTQ agendas in schools, a few have begun to pave the way by requiring an inclusive curriculum so that all voices can be heard.

Gender Norms in Education

During colonial America, teachers were most often young, white men, as women were often illiterate and, therefore, could not hold teaching positions. Women were also expected to stay home with the children while their husbands worked to financially support the family (Boyle, 2004). It was not until women became crucial in passing on religious values from the Bible that society valued their education, and thus, literacy amongst women increased. By 1850, women and men had nearly equal literacy rates, and women were becoming more prominent in the teaching profession (Boyle, 2004). Furthermore, as schooling became formalized, and the demand for teachers grew, schools could pay women less than men, therefore increasing the number of female teachers (Boyle, 2004). As more women became teachers, men moved into

administrative roles, changing the dynamic of teaching from a career which offered independence and respect to one which granted neither (Blount, 2006).

According to Boyle (2004), in the years to follow, homosexuality gained attention, and as Wimberly (2015) suggests, school officials became concerned with the gender identity of teachers and the gender lessons they were teaching. In the decades around the Civil War, society connected what it considered feminine attributes with the teaching profession, leaving male educators to "defend their masculinity" (Wimberly, 2015, p. 24). As the nineteenth century came to an end, a "boy problem" became an ever-increasing concern of education leaders, who feared that the disproportionate ratio of female teachers to male students would lead to issues in gender development for boys (Wimberly, 2015). In fact, these concerns remained despite the growing research that sexual attraction had to do with "the nature of one's being" as opposed to a choice or a "sinful" act (Wimberly, 2015, p. 24). In an attempt to have more male teachers, Jackie Blount (2006) explains that school districts would hire almost any man for the job, even if he did not fit traditional male gender norms (p. 16).

By 1911, New York City schools continued to see an increase in women teachers and even administrators (Blount, 2006). One superintendent, Grace Strachan, campaigned for equal pay, highly displeasing male teachers. Men countered by saying that if women received equal pay, they would be so disgusted they would leave (Blount, 2006). When various arguments to dismantle women's fight for equal pay were not accepted by the public, male teachers forwarded a new rhetoric. One New York Times headline read: "Appeal for Men Teachers-- Boys Too Effeminate, Say Principals, When They Haven't Male Instructors" (Blount, 2006, p. 12). The men voiced that a lack of male teachers in elementary schools was a "distinct loss to the boys"

(Blount, 2006, p. 12). This caught the public's attention, and school policies began to focus on gender and sexual orientation.

As the twentieth century continued, Strachan won her fight for equal pay, which did, in turn, lead to fewer men in the profession. An already-low pay, and now one equal to women's, struck fear in male teachers that not only were boys becoming effeminate, but society would begin viewing them as effeminate too (Blount, 2006). Men wanted work which allowed them to "maintain a conventional middle-class masculinity", through which they "earned enough to support families, they exerted clear authority over women, and their work granted them independence"-- none of which were provided from teaching, a career which was deemed "women's work" (Blount, 2006, p. 13).

These gender stereotypes in the teaching profession serve as an example of how societies perpetuated rigid norms surrounding gender and sexual orientation. For example, in the mid-1800s, schools provided "gender-appropriate modeling" for students by hiring women as teachers and men as administrators-- displaying men in their "traditional male-head-of-household" roles (Blount, 2006, p. 15). They also modeled suitable sexual-orientation by hiring only single women, as they were viewed as "chaste and pure guardians of virtue" and married men, who led heterosexual households. Married women were required to resign, and unmarried men were seen as "irresponsible" or "lacking manliness" (Blount, 2006, p. 15). In this way, schools were taking on some responsibility for how children implicitly learned about gender norms.

However, many female teachers challenged these standards by simply not marrying, and instead, supporting themselves on their own incomes. Some even lived with other women or in communities of women (Blount, 2006). The public saw these women and the aforementioned "effeminate male teachers" hired in an attempt to have any male teachers at all, as disruptive to

the traditional gender and sexual orientation standards (Blount, 2006, p. 16). School districts began cracking down even more on who they hired for their schools (Blount, 2006).

Perpetuating this narrative against homosexuals, Willard Waller's 1932 *The Sociology of Teaching* claimed that homosexuality was contagious and warned against hiring gay teachers (Wimberly, 2015). At the end of World War II, LGBTQ service members were removed from the military, and by the beginning of the Cold War, as politics and scientific arguments came into play, civil rights issues for LGBTQ citizens grew (Wimberly, 2015). At the risk of public activists losing their jobs, their homes, their safety, and their freedom, many just tried to survive. At this time, in a *widespread purge*, many LGBTQ teachers and professors were removed from their jobs (Wimberly, 2015, p. 25). In 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy convinced the United States that communism and homosexuality were linked, and that both were "threats to U.S. security" (Wimberly, 2015, p. 26). Thus, the U.S. Senate (1950) issued a report titled *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government* in which government officials launched an inquiry

> to determine the extent of the employment of homosexuals and other sex perverts in Government; to consider reasons why their employment by the Government is undesirable; and to examine into the efficacy of the methods used in dealing with the problem (para. 3).

After only three months in office, President Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10450, banning all homosexuals from holding jobs in government (Wimberly, 2015). This led to an onslaught of attacks, including police raids and compulsory hospitalization against LGBTQ people. Despite continued findings that went against the conventional views of gender and sexuality, such as the Kinsey reports in 1953, a decided lack of support for LGBTQ educators sustained stereotypes and kept these teachers, professors, and their supporters silent (Wimberly, 2015).

The Florida Legislative Investigation Committee

Though pro-LGBTQ organizations continued advocating for rights and assimilation across the country, the public remained fearful of speaking out in support of LGBTQ rights in education. In one extreme case in Florida, educators and students faced intrusive discrimination from 1956 to 1965 (Bertwell, 2005; Wimberly, 2015). In its early days, the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC) was focused on uprooting the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) by attempting to draw connections between Communists and "political liberals, civil rights activists, and integrationists" (Bertwell, 2005, p. 412). In 1958, the committee used the same reasoning to fix its sights on homosexuals (Bertwell, 2005). The collective goal was to spy on, interrogate, and condemn those in the academic field whom the committee assumed to be gay (Wimberly, 2015). This committee, also known as the Johns Committee-- named after its chairman, Senator Charley Johns-- used deceitful and manipulative tactics to pressure individuals during interrogation (Braukman, 2012), and without support from the Florida Education Association, many teachers lost their credentials and their jobs (Wimberly, 2015). Professors at Florida universities were fired, and students were permitted to remain on campus under the conditions that they complied with psychiatric treatments and visits to the infirmary (Howard, 1997).

For years, the Johns Committee interrogated hundreds of professors and students at the University of Florida (UF) and the University of South Florida (USF) to amass accusations against individuals thought to be gay or lesbian (Bertwell, 2005). The committee accepted allegations based on others' perceptions, such as what the targeted individuals wore; what other students said about a professor, even if the student divulging this information to the committee

did not know the professor; and as stated by one university student, "the way they act… nothing specific" (Howard, 1997, p. 137).

The committee also targeted school teachers. In one example, music teacher William J. Neal was interrogated for eight hours by the committee's lead investigator, RJ Strickland (Howard, 1997). Though it is not clear that Neal ever succumbed to the pressure, Strickland still proceeded to have Neal's credentials taken away. Neal and two other Pinellas County school teachers sued Florida's head of the Department of Education, Governor Farris Bryant, for refusing them due process during the interrogations, which led to the loss of their teaching certificates (Braukman, 2012). In late 1962, the Florida Supreme Court ruled in favor of the teachers, who, despite an appeal by the Johns Committee, not only received their certificates back, but were owed nearly three years of back pay from the Pinellas County Board of Public Instruction (Braukman, 2012; Howard, 1997). This case, along with the 5-4 ruling in favor of Theodore Gibson, president of NAACP, Miami, eventually hindered the committee's actions. Once relatively covert, it now faced both criticism and support from the public (Braukman, 2012).

On April 18, 1963, Charley Johns and FLIC attorney Mark Hawes stood their ground when they addressed the legislature and discussed their actions over the previous two years. Hawes recounted lists of community complaints regarding "anti-Christian teachings" and how USF administrators and faculty professed "academic freedom" (Braukman, 2012, pp. 132-133). Hawes, as cited by Braukman (2012), likened this notion to "the right to bring communist sympathizers and communists themselves to teach and indoctrinate" and "the right to bring… intellectual garbage off the newsstands and put it in the classrooms as required texts" (p. 133). Johns took the approach of urging the legislators to "remember the children" by stating that the

seventy teachers whose certificates were rescinded "are the teachers teaching your children" and that the "work of the committee has got to go on" (Braukman, 2012, p. 133).

On April 24th, John Allen, USF President, had his chance to approach the legislature. Although he was sure to point out misinformation in the Johns Committee's report, he also supported much of what they said. For example, he noted that students should be "screened for 'homosexual tendencies', receive psychiatric treatment, and be removed from universities" (Braukman, 2012, p. 133). Allen, despite his attempt to defend his university and its professors' high standings, had already given way to the Johns Committee by creating and adhering to policies which ostensibly permitted discrimination against LGBTQ members of USF (Bertwell, 2005).

During the summer months, Hawes and Strickland resigned, and three new members joined the committee. In September, the committee expanded its purview by meeting with government officials from Chicago and Washington D.C. These meetings confirmed for the committee members that their suspicions were correct: Communists were infiltrating academic institutions and were "corrupting the nation's moral fiber" (Howard, 1997, p. 148). A week after President Kennedy's assassination, the new FLIC chairman, Richard O. Mitchell, used the tragic event to convince the public that the committee's work would protect them from danger and promised them "internal security" (Braukman, 2012, p. 137).

Investigations were stalled, but student activist groups and civil rights protests were on the rise in 1963. Mitchell, unable to legally continue interrogating LGBTQ educators, disguised his work as a research project (Howard, 1997). In January of 1964, FLIC released its book titled *Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida*. The opening lines read: "Homosexuality is, and for too long has been, a skeleton in the closet of society" (Florida Legislative Investigation

Committee, 1964, para. 1). The book posits that homosexuality is "the subject for a party joke" and "something to warn one's children about in vague and general terms" (Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, 1964, para. 3).

After the release of *Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida*, the Johns Committee continued their work to spread hatred and discrimination by keeping tabs on civil rights groups and even organizing panels to suppress the rights of homosexuals (Braukman, 2012). However, as the book reached more people, the public had mixed opinions about it. They tended to agree with its message, but felt uneasy about how the content was delivered in such a perverse manner (Howard, 1997). Committee supporters started to fall to the wayside while gay-rights groups spread the word about the book, an action which Senator Bill Young denounced as "belittl[ing] the work of the Committee" (Howard, 1997, p. 151). By 1965, after a lack of public support and several more resignations, Charley Johns decided to end the work of the committee. Its records were either destroyed or locked away, and the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee officially came to an end (Howard, 1997).

The Fight for Rights Continues

Although the work of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee is considered "the most intense investigation of homosexuality in the history of U.S. education" (Wimberly, 2015, p.26), Floridian teachers were not the only ones facing discrimination based on sexual orientation in the workplace. In California, 1964, male teacher Mark Morrison had sexual relations with a male coworker, who later reported the encounter to school officials (Wimberly, 2015). Morrison resigned, and in the following years, lost his teaching credentials (Blount, 2006). In court, Morrison was backed by the ACLU in the effort to repossess his credentials (Blount, 2006). The State Supreme Court ruled that, despite being legal in California,

Morrison's actions were *immoral*, and with this information now public, the Court supported the school district's decision to prohibit him from returning to work with children (Blount, 2006).

In one Oregon high school, several teachers faced discrimination based on rumors about them or their physical attributes (Blount, 2006). For example, multiple male teachers were suspended for having long hair, one did not have his contract renewed because he had a mustache, and teachers who admitted that they were gay either resigned or entered treatment facilities (Blount, 2006). Peggy Burton, however, would not be one of these teachers.

When confronted by her principal regarding rumors that she was a lesbian, she simply replied, "So what" (Hinkle, 2015, para. 3). A few days later, she was fired, and over the next few years, she-- supported by the ACLU-- built her case to take to court. In the end, U.S. District Court stated that the removal of teachers based on "immorality" was not clear enough because, as quoted by Blount (2006), "immorality means different things to different people" (p. 114). Burton received payments from the Court to help cover some of the losses after she was fired, and she was able to have the record expunged from her employment file, but she did not receive her job back (Blount, 2006). This sparked a fire in Burton and inspired her to join the crowds of LGBTQ people organizing equal rights marches and protests.

One organized group was established in 1972 by New Jersey high school teacher John Gish. Already a member of the Gay Activists Alliance, an organization which assisted members in honing their skills in political organizing, amongst other things, Gish now formed the Gay Teachers Caucus of the National Education Association (NEA) (Blount, 2006). The goal was to advocate for the rights of LGBTQ educators, and he told *The Advocate* magazine that he was tired of lying in order to maintain an appropriate image (Blount, 2006). When his school board caught wind of his work and required him to see a psychiatrist, Gish refused and lost his teaching

job. Instead, he was given work away from his school, and was forbidden to see current or graduated students (Blount, 2006). Gish continued to speak out for gay rights, and he addressed his concerns with the New Jersey Education Association. However, by 1976, the Supreme Court of New Jersey agreed with the district's decision to require Gish to seek psychiatric treatment, claiming that his "deviation from normal mental health… might affect his ability to teach, discipline, and associate with students" (Blount, 2006, p. 115).

Students Demand Their Rights

There are countless stories about teachers being fired (or forced to resign), being required to visit a psychiatrist, and losing their teaching certificates. One story that is not often told, however, is the story of a 1970s milestone for LGBTQ students: the formation of the first, what is now called, Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) (Johnson, 2007). Dominique Johnson (2007) notes that, while credit for the first GSA is typically given to students from a suburban Boston private school in the late 1980s, this version of history disregards the work of the gay students of color who began the first unofficial GSA at George Washington High School in New York City in 1972. In the same year that John Gish established the Gay Teachers Caucus, a group of fearless teenagers created a safe, supportive environment for gay youth and their allies and brought LGBTQ activism inside of schools for the first time through the Gay International Youth Society (Johnson, 2007).

In the years just following the Stonewall riots, often regarded as the official start of the gay rights movement, the students at George Washington High School wanted people to recognize their plight, not only as gay people, but as gay *students* (Johnson, 2007). This identity comes with its own set of burdens and discrimination, but, as noted by Johnson (2007), also highlights the voices of LGBTQ youth activists and their work in demanding "safer schools

where they could be free from both physical and psychological harm" (p. 381). The students argued that "we, therefore, as gay students demand the same rights (social and political) as straight students" (Cohen, 2007, p. 75). They recognized that "the very nature of coming-out demands that we become political; there is no other choice" (Cohen, 2007, p. 3). With helpful faculty and a supportive principal, they were able to make their voices heard (Cohen, 2007).

Unfortunately, not all students were so lucky to have support from their school staff and had to turn to legal matters. The ACLU has defended students in their fights to form GSAs, leading federal judges to rule in favor of the students in at least six states (Sinclair & Reece, 2016). Such was the case for a group of Georgia students, whose attempt to form a GSA garnered much attention from the school board and the press (Sinclair & Reece, 2016). The law states that schools must allow the formation of a GSA if there is at least one other non-curricular club at the school. This Georgia school, however, tried to find a loophole by forbidding any other non-curricular club from forming in order to stall the progress of the GSA (Sinclair & Reece, 2016). However, according to the Legal Information Institute (2020):

> It shall be unlawful for any public secondary school which receives federal financial assistance and which has limited open forum to deny equal access or fair opportunity to, or discriminate against, any students who wish to conduct a meeting within that limited open forum on the basis of the religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings (*20 U.S. Code § 4071 - Denial of Equal Access Prohibited*).

In almost every legal case, the courts have ruled in favor of the students, and GSAs have prevailed.

While there have been some major victories for LGBTQ students, there is still a long way to go. Currently, public schools in six U.S. states operate under No Promo Homo laws, which forbid the teaching of homosexuality (Policy Maps, 2019). Some states, like Louisiana and South Carolina, take on the role of neutrality, meaning teachers are not allowed to mention it at

all, while others indicate that if schools do teach it, they can only do so in a negative manner (McGovern, 2012). Moreover, Texas's Health and Safety Code mandates youth programs to teach "that homosexuality conduct is not an acceptable lifestyle and is a criminal offense" (McGovern, 2012, pp. 472-473).

Though these laws are a huge obstacle in the fight for equal rights, a handful of states are doing their part to help. In 2011, California became the first state to include in its Education Code 51204.5 that the study of LGBT Americans be taught in grades one through twelve and prohibited any materials "reflecting adversely upon persons" based on their sexual orientation (*California Department of Education*, 2020, para. 3). In 2019, New Jersey, Colorado, Oregon, and Illinois followed suit (Walker, 2019). Illinois senator and sponsor of the bill, Heather Steans, said, "An inclusive curriculum will not only teach an accurate version of history but also promote acceptance in the LGBTQ community" (Gage, 2019, para. 2).

Historical Summary

When early formalized schools required female teachers to be single and placed heterosexual men in administrative leadership positions, they laid the groundwork for how children viewed what was acceptable for them to be. By learning these gender norms, men believed they had to lead households, have authority over women, and maintain independence. When women began fighting for equal pay in the early twentieth century, male teachers felt that this would diminish their masculinity and society would view them as effeminate.

Eventually, effeminate male teachers, or anyone else suspected of being gay, were interrogated, fired, and often stripped of their teaching credentials. Homosexuality was viewed as a mental instability, and many argued that it was unsafe for children to be around or exposed to. Though many of the teachers who filed lawsuits were ultimately deemed to have been

wrongly terminated, they often did not receive their jobs back because their actions were publicly known or considered immoral. These notions further stigmatized the LGBTQ community and intensified the public's ill feelings toward it.

While there was a period of fear revolving around LGBTQ support in education, activists finally began to speak out. Many risked their jobs, reputations, and safety in order to stand up for themselves and their communities. Students, with the help of the ACLU, defended their own rights to have safe and supportive GSAs at school. And eventually, some people started to get on board. In 2011, California made U.S. history by requiring LGBTQ-inclusive curricula across the state.

The work of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee did irreparable damage to teachers, professors, and students across Florida. No Promo Homo laws in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas are doing the same to students today. While progress has undoubtedly been made, there is still much work to be done to truly acquire equal rights for LGBTQIA+ students, teachers, and citizens in the United States. Developing inclusive curricula and creating safe spaces in schools, and listening to the voices of those who lead the way might just be a good place to start.

The Effects of a Lack of Representation and Support in Schools on LGBTQ Students

When students step into the classroom, they bring with them their personalities, hobbies, academic interests, and abilities. They also bring with them what can sometimes be more socially stigmatizing factors like their races, genders, gender identities, religions, socioeconomic statuses, and sexual orientations. It is crucial that teachers recognize and value students as whole people, including their backgrounds. It is essential that students feel represented in their classrooms, and it is especially important that they do not feel shamed or unaccepted by their

teachers and peers. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many students, who are continually victimized for being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning.

While this behavior is not typically tolerated in schools, one of the contributing factors to it is a lack of education and awareness around these social issues. If students' lives continue to be considered "controversial" to discuss in the classroom-- for example Black Lives Matter and marriage equality-- then not discussing them is contributing to the stigmatization of historically disenfranchised peoples. Teachers are told not to be "political", but as Henry Giroux tells us, there is a difference between *political pedagogy* and *politicizing pedagogy* (Giroux, 2019, para. 3). The aim of a political pedagogy is to instill in students a need for "social responsibility and taking a stand", while a politicizing pedagogy assumes an indoctrination of students to act and think as their educator does (Giroux, 2019, para. 3).

Mandates for teachers keep the classroom "free of politics" is seen in countless schools and districts throughout the country (Giroux, 2019, para. 1). In Giroux's (2019) words, these teachers believe "that schools should be spaces where matters of power, values and social justice should not be addressed" (para. 1). One of the looming issues with this agenda is that students do not receive the quality education they need to make their own informed decisions, but rather they are conditioned to adhere to the structure and systems of the dominant power.

Through two controversial presidential elections, multiple school shootings across the country, and being told to not openly support the LGBTQ+ community, American educators have been reminded by administrators time and time again of the importance of remaining neutral in the classroom. We are not to reveal our political opinions, which, to me, means we are not to speak about what we value in society. What many administrators may not yet realize is that by ignoring these issues completely, we are reinforcing the narrative that these events do not

matter. They do not deserve our attention. What's worse: we are implying that we agree.

The fear is that, by bringing politics into the classroom, teachers will impose our own beliefs on our students. Our goal is not to indoctrinate our students by creating miniature versions of ourselves, but rather to give our students a space in which they can critically question authoritative powers and learn and practice "social responsibility" (Giroux, 2019, para. 3). When we give our students the chance to come to their own conclusions and to develop creative solutions to problems, we are giving them the skills and tools they need to build a better future for themselves and those around them.

Remaining "Neutral" While Our Students' Lives are at Stake

In August 2019, Illinois became the fourth state to require a LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, joining California, Colorado, and New Jersey (Leins, 2019). Meanwhile, the Trump administration had been using its power to cause harm to the LGBTQ+ community by taking discriminatory legal action. The National Center for Transgender Equality (2017) has cited at least sixty-three instances where the Trump administration has made significant changes that discriminate against the LGBTQ community. What we need are politicians who can relate to our kids because, having been a LGBTQ student in school, they know first-hand what these students need to feel safe and successful. Unfortunately, the actions of the White House, beginning with "scrubb[ing] all mentions of LGBTQ people from the websites of the White House, Department of State, and Department of Labor" on Inauguration Day 2017, only make it harder and harder for LGBTQ individuals to be in these positions of power (The National Center for Transgender Equality, 2017, para. 64).

In the summer of 2020, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that Title VII protects the employment of LGBTQIA+ individuals after three people "were allegedly fired…

simply for being homosexual or transgender" (*17-1618 Bostock v. Clayton County (06/15/2020)*, 2020, p. 1). This landmark ruling could serve well as a resource to teach students about 1) significant current events and 2) how to know and stand up for your rights and others'. Instead, the fear of reprimand still keeps many teachers silent. How are we preparing our students for a future in which they will likely need to fight for their rights when we are too afraid to even discuss the topic in class?

It seems unethical to think that teachers must remain "neutral" while the government is proposing and creating policies that harm LGBTQ individuals and retracting previous efforts to help them. For example, in 2016, The Departments of Justice and Education released a guidance intended to assist schools in providing civil rights for their transgender students under Title IX. The guidance included information about how to protect students' privacy, create inclusive dress codes, use appropriate pronouns, have access to sex-segregated facilities, and many more ("U.S. Departments of Education and Justice Release Joint Guidance to Help Schools Ensure the Civil Rights of Transgender Students | U.S. Department of Education, 2016). On February 22, 2017, the new presidential administration withdrew this guidance (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2017). Actions like this can only cause harm, and schools who do not fight back against a discriminatory system are only perpetuating this harm. With the 2016 policy in place, our students could be attending much safer and more accepting schools. Instead, they are being further ostracized.

When this is the example set for our students-- our own government demonstrating outright discrimination against its own citizens-- then how can we expect our students to behave any differently in schools unless we are allowed to talk about it? As Joe Kincheloe (2012) questions in "Critical Pedagogy in the 21st Century", how are schools "operat[ing] to validate or

challenge the power dynamics of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, indigenous/aboriginal issues, physical ability-related concerns, etc." (p. 13). When students are verbally harassed at school and are not supported by the staff, the answer to Kincheloe's question is clear. Schools are only validating, not challenging, power dynamics that oppress disenfranchised peoples. If more districts had comprehensive bullying policies, meaning they would enumerate sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (among others) as targets of bullying, then there would be no grounds to not address harassment and bullying.

These implementations are incredibly important so that our kids can feel safe, happy, and supported at school. Pennsylvania's LGBTQ students hear a remarkably exorbitant amount of verbal harassment and negative remarks at school ("GLSEN 2017 National School Climate Survey," 2017). In an inclusive curriculum, students would be encouraged to study the political decisions that are oppressing marginalized communities every day. We would be allowed to discuss the sixty-three changes made since 2017-- that are harming and dehumanizing the LGBTQ+ community-- in order to better prepare students to rise against these discriminatory actions. If students never know the severe issues marginalized communities face, they will never be able to become activists in the fight.

Bullying

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Education, as cited by Earnshaw et al. (2017), define bullying as the following: "Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, or educational harm" (p. 2). Multiple scholars express that

those who experience bullying and victimization are at higher risk of facing harmful and sometimes long-lasting effects of bullying (Alex Wagaman, 2016; Cashman, 1998 as cited in Biddulph, 2006; Earnshaw et al., 2017; Page, 2017). Moreover, youth who identify with more "stigmatized groups" or are "less socially connected" have a higher chance of being targets of bullying (Earnshaw et al., 2017, p. 2).

According to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey, about 20% of youth in America report being bullied at school, but lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, are "more likely to be targeted by bullying" (Earnshaw et al., 2017, p. 2). Specifically, research indicates that from 2014 to 2015, 18.8% of heterosexual students and 34.2% of LGB students reported being bullied at school (Earnshaw et al., 2017). Because of this, LGBTQ youth may experience more symptoms of depression than their heterosexual peers (Diamond & Lucas, 2004 as cited in Bond, 2015). LGBT youth also report "feeling less safe, less respected, and less valued in our schools than do their heterosexual and cisgender peers, leading to lower engagement and achievement" (Page, 2017, p. 1). This is extremely dangerous because repeated instances of bullying may cause youth to either internalize or externalize these experiences, which can have harmful and long-lasting effects on the individual (Earnshaw et al., 2017).

One effect illustrated in the research is the negative impact bullying has on students' academics. Studies show that LGBTQ students who are in negative school environments and who are targeted because of their sexual orientation or gender expression, particularly those whose bullying is not noticed or addressed by others, are less likely to continue schooling after high school or even to complete high school at all (Alex Wagaman, 2016; "GLSEN 2017 National School Climate Survey," n.d.; Page, 2017). Page (2017) expands on this research by

also highlighting the decrease in attendance and grade-point averages for students who encounter negative school environments.

In addition to negative academic outcomes, research also shows that "stigma-based bullying" can actually lead to "worse health outcomes than non-stigma-based bullying" (Earnshaw et al., 2017, p. 3). This includes bullying related to "actual or perceived sexual orientation" (Earnshaw et al., 2017, p. 3). Some of these health-related outcomes are increases in depressive and suicidal thoughts (Bond, 2015; Hatzenbuehler, 2011 & Saewyc, 2011 as cited in Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015). In fact, as the Massachusetts Department of Education state, "LGB adolescents are almost four times as likely as heterosexual youth to attempt suicide" (Bond, 2015, p. 52). The increase of suicide and drug use is also seen more prominently at less supportive schools (Hatzenbuehler, Wieringa, & Keyes, 2011 as cited in Alex Wagaman, 2016). One article details some other harmful effects as "loss of confidence and self-esteem, becoming withdrawn and nervous, reduced ability to concentrate, fall in academic achievement, truancy and school-phobia" (Biddulph, 2006, p. 18).

Although the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has noted that "progress has been made" since their first National School Climate Survey in 1999, students still report various types of bullying, including verbal and physical harassment, from peers and school staff alike (Page, 2017, p. 1). And while there is ample research that shows the harms of bullying and unsupportive school atmospheres, it remains unclear as to whether certain bullying interventions are effective. For example, while Earnshaw et al. (2017) note that LGBTQ bullying interventions in schools have been shown to reduce bullying and increase empathy, they admit that this may not be generalizable to other types of schools, locations, etc. Furthermore, they suggest that additional research must be done to determine whether bullying prevention

programs, such as Olweus, help "reduce LGBTQ bullying specifically" (Earnshaw et al., 2017, p. 3).

While there is still much work to be done in this research, it is imperative that our LGBTQ youth find communities that support, encourage, and validate them. Right now, many of our schools are not doing that.

Are Resources Available?

GLSEN works to provide support to and resources for LGBTQ youth. Part of their efforts include conducting school surveys with middle and high school students (specific demographics not provided). The 2017 National School Climate Survey collected data on a variety of factors impacting LGBTQ youth including the "Availability of School-Based Resources and Supports", specifically Supportive School Clubs, Inclusive Curricular Resources, Supportive School Personnel, and Inclusive and Supportive School Policies. GLSEN reports that having these critical elements in place can lead to a safer and more inclusive school environment for LGBTQ students.

According to GLSEN's (2018) survey, when asked about whether or not LGBTQ topics such as "people, history, and events" were taught in class, 64.8% of students said they were not. Of those who said they were covered, 19.9% said that the topics were reflected positively, while 18.6% said that they were negatively taught (GLSEN, 2018). In regards to extra-curricular clubs, 53.3% reported that they had a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or something similar at their school. Of these students, 51.1% reported that they were sometimes present at club meetings. However, of those who did not attend regularly, one reason cited was that LGBTQ students of color did not feel included.

When it came to finding supportive staff members, the numbers increased. At 96.6%, almost every student said that they could identify at least one LGBTQ-supportive staff member, and around 61% could name six or more staff members who were supportive (GLSEN, 2018). Although most students could identify supportive staff members, only 42.3% said that they would feel comfortable talking with a teacher. Others even said that unsupportive staff contributed to their reasons for not wanting to complete high school. When asked about this topic, 59.8% of students attributed "hostile school climate", specifically "harassment, unsupportive peers or educators, and gendered school policies/practices, such as restrictions on which bathroom they are allowed to use" as reasons for not wanting to finish (GLSEN, 2018, p. 44). Student reports also found that only 12.6% of school bullying, harassment, and assault policies explicitly protected LGBTQ students under both sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

A Student's Perspective

After researching the alarming statistics about the lack of basic safety our LGBTQ students feel at school, I wanted to hear from one of my own students. As a teacher, I am aware of many things that occur in school, but I knew that a student's perspective would provide me insight that I would not otherwise have. I was curious to know about what students witness and experience in the hallways of our own school. I conducted an interview with a student whom I will call "Joseph". Joseph volunteered to do the interview, understanding that it was about diversity and representation in the curriculum. I intentionally omitted "LGBTQ+" from the description in order to get the most authentic answers possible and not make Joseph feel as though he had to answer in any particular way. Below is a summary of our interview.

Joseph is a thirteen-year-old Caucasian male in the seventh-grade. I began the interview by asking him some broad questions about diversity in the school curriculum. When asked what "categories" come to mind when he thinks of diversity, he said ethnicity and religion. He said that he has learned about Urban communities (in regards to planting produce) from his Family and Consumer Science class, "old communities", and what the South was like during the Civil War, but admits that he has not learned much about modern African American communities. He also said that learning about what the South was like during the Civil War made him feel more disconnected from that community because he never learned about what it is like today.

When I narrowed the questions specifically to the LGBTQ+ community, Joseph said that he knows people who are gay through his ballet classes, and his dad's friend is gay, so he has a positive view on the community. He also said, however, that he has never learned about it in school, and he believes that this is because it is still not always "socially accepted." He believes that it is not in the curriculum because some people may not want their children to learn about it, and admits that students may be taken aback if they were to read a book that focused on a gay character. He said that if the teacher "didn't make a big deal" out of it, then he thinks the students would eventually see it as "normal" and "not weird". In a follow-up question, Joseph told me that he hears people use language such as, "That's so gay" in the hallways quite frequently, and that he believes learning about the repercussions of this language could help to limit its use.

My interview with Joseph made me realize that our school curriculum has a very limited representation of people with varied and diverse backgrounds. I was shocked to learn just how narrow that scope truly is, given the fact that Joseph did not even consider sexual orientation or gender identity as a part of diversity, but it reaffirmed my belief that our students deserve to learn

about other cultures and that all students should have the chance to be represented in the curriculum.

I taught Joseph in my second year of teaching. During my first full year, one student confided in me that she is bisexual, and another student wrote about being bi in her This I Believe speech for my English class. That same year, a student in the other English class wrote about being pansexual. Early in 2020, a student I taught several years prior told me that she is bisexual. This year-- in my fourth year of teaching-- I teach a gender-fluid student who uses the pronouns she/they. When I asked this student how they want to communicate with me which pronouns they were using each day, they were so genuinely excited to have a teacher who respected pronouns.

While I am grateful to be in a position of support for my students, these students deserve more. They deserve to have teachers who are not afraid to openly support them. They deserve to be protected when a classmate harasses them. They deserve to have their voices heard in the books we read and the histories we study. So I keep these students' stories in the forefront of my mind to remind me that there is work to be done. That their entire school experience should feel safe and inclusive. And when I recently attended the high school GSA meeting and saw so many familiar faces, I felt even more strongly about making sure our middle schoolers had the same opportunity-- one that these now-high school students expressed would have been very beneficial to them in middle school.

Obstacles to an Inclusive Education

While staggering statistics about the negative effects of bullying show a clear need for intervention, there are many obstacles to attaining this inclusive environment. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000) cites the government as hindering the education system. He

highlights that the reason so many educational policies and plans have failed is because the creators base their ideas on "their own personal views of reality" and not those of the people it serves (p. 94). For example, many policymakers, such as our former Secretary of Education, do not create our education system based on what is best for kids. Betsy DeVos has been on record saying that she would allow "state flexibility" to overrule a case where federal dollars were being used in a school that discriminated against LGBTQ students (Bendery, 2017, para. 6). After being pressed about this issue, she retracted her statement, saying that "where federal dollars flow, federal law must be adhered to" (Klein, 2018, para. 8). However, she had already made it clear that her policy focused on a system which only reflected her personal views and opinions.

Another barrier to an inclusive education is the focus on state-standardized testing. Apple (2012) describes American education as "factories" focused on achieving the highest test scores while treating its teachers poorly and "unworthy of serious respect" (p. 4). And while I recognize that I teach in a district in which students will most often perform well on tests, the act of "covering material" or "meeting standards" is less important to me than helping my students become active and engaged citizens. As long as schools continue to invest in programs that will raise test scores instead of programs to improve social awareness and mental health, then inclusive curricula will fall by wayside, and "teaching to the test" will prevail.

Michael Apple (2012) asks "Can Education Change Society?" Not only *can* it, but it *must*. We, as teachers, must teach our students to question and challenge the dominant authority, and we can prepare our teachers by the same practice. As discussed in *Pedagogy of Freedom*, we must move from training our teachers to rooting their education in ethics (Freire, 2000). This translates into their own pedagogy, thereby creating a cycle of teachers and students who engage in a democratic education.

Creating Safer, More Inclusive Schools for LGBTQIA+ Students

"To know how to teach is to create possibilities for the construction and production of knowledge rather than to be engaged simply in a game of transferring knowledge" (Freire, 2000, p. 49). This quote by Freire strikes me every time I read it. It should be the mantra of every school and every student-teaching program. We, as teachers, need to realize and remember that our jobs are not to make or train our kids to know and believe what we know and believe. That theory is incredibly limiting and harmful as our views may not always be applicable to our kids' lives. And when that is the case, we are left with a world full of adults who do not know how to interpret or analyze new information. Moreover, we are limiting our students' abilities to problem-solve and turning them into dependent beings. Instead, we must teach them how to think, problem solve, and use their resources to complete tasks and accomplish their goals.

Freire's (2000) idea of teaching (creating possibilities for the construction and production of knowledge) is emphasized in the film "You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train" when Howard Zinn (2002) states that teachers should teach their students to "intercede with whatever is happening in the world". Zinn did this by inspiring his students at Spelman College to protest in peaceful demonstrations in the South in the 1960s. He says, "to be neutral is to collaborate with whatever is going on" (Zinn, 2002). If the status quo is to oppress marginalized groups of people, then to remain silent is to not only comply with that notion, but to uphold it as correct or even acceptable. To comply is to maintain all of the power in the hands of the oppressors. Zinn gave his students the liberation to stand up for themselves and to not be content with how they were being treated. He operated with radicalism under the definition of "going to the root of problems and demanding that those problems be confronted" (Zinn, 2002). When phrased that way, is radicalism really all that extreme? Should we not all demand that problems be

confronted? We can no longer sit by while large, systemic issues remain unfaced and unchallenged.

Zinn (2002) gave his Black students the pathway to go from being "members of a controlled, conservative college to being active participants in history". When we, as teachers, reflect on all of the great civil rights movements and how they have led us to where we are today, it seems unreasonable that we would not want our students to do their part in shaping history. We are constantly told that we need to be neutral in the classroom as to not create division or controversy with our students, but that, in fact, is not neutral at all. Zinn (2002) even notes in the film that the "turning point in [his] political consciousness" was when he attended a demonstration in which police were hitting and attacking people on the streets. It was then that he realized that the police and the government are not neutral, because as long as systemic power structures remain, no one can be neutral. And although we may be stifled from expressing our beliefs in the classroom, we still hold the responsibility of making our students aware of their roles in the world.

While I wish it were acceptable for educators to have more open and honest dialogue in the classroom, I understand, to an extent, why "remaining neutral" is a rule. There is a fine line between standing up to make the world a *better* place, and thinking that one is *better* than someone else for doing so. Freire (2000) makes a point of saying that no matter how much he finds another person "irritat[ing]", he does not have the right to hold himself on a pedestal, thinking that he is "superior" or that the other person is "incompetent" (p. 51). Unfortunately, many people forget this when they are out making change. And we will never be able to work together if we do not even see ourselves as equal beings in the world.

As I have previously discussed, one relationship in which I consider myself equal is with my students. This is why, in my efforts to make our school a safer and more supportive place, I have relied on their input. They are the ones whose lives and school experiences are directly impacted by the level of inclusiveness provided. They are the ones whose oppression must be liberated. And in order to create this environment, schools must be willing to adapt their practices to meet the needs of their students.

In *Safe is Not Enough: Better Schools for LGBTQ Students*, Michael Sadowski posits three main factors that all schools need to support their LGBTQ+ students: anti-bullying programs, safe zones, and GSAs (Sadowski, 2016). He argues that "safety is an essential baseline… but it is not a sufficient goal in itself" (Sadowski, 2016, p. 13). Safety alone is not enough to meet all of our students' needs and help them achieve their highest levels of success. Schools should meet students' needs that go beyond safety and into thriving as a LGBTQ youth. We need to move from no protection to safety to *affirmation* (Sadowski, 2016).

Although many schools have put some combination of these supports in place (Sadowski, 2016), one reason they may be hesitant to enact all of them is because society sees sexuality as an "adult issue" (Frank & Cannon, 2009, p. 3), and, because schools shape their views based on society, they opt not to address LGBTQ issues in the planning of their curriculum and student resources. (Vare & Norton, 2004, McFarland & Dupuis, 2001 as cited in Frank & Cannon, 2009). However, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (2007) argues this by pointing out that girls are aware of their sexulaities by age ten and boys by age nine (as cited in Frank & Cannon, 2009). This strengthens the need for protections at school.

One protection that GLSEN strongly supports is the need for comprehensive bullying policies. GLSEN explains that the difference amongst generic, partially-enumerated, and

comprehensive bullying policies is that generic policies do not specify protection for students based on their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression; partially-enumerated policies specify one, but not both; and comprehensive policies explicitly protect both. According to the 2017 National School Climate Survey, students in schools with comprehensive bullying policies reported experiencing the "lowest levels of victimization" ("GLSEN 2017 National School Climate Survey," 2017, p. 76).

Valerie A. Earnshaw, et al. explain that "LG youth who live in counties where a greater proportion of school districts have antibullying policies that include sexual orientation have a lower risk of suicide attempts than those in counties with fewer districts with these policy protections" (Earnshaw et al., 2017, p. 3) This enhances the need for, at bare minimum, partially-enumerated policies, if not comprehensive. The facts are inarguable: enumerated bullying policies save lives.

In an effort to protect our students under the law, Representative Linda Sánchez of the United States Congress introduced a bipartisan bill called the Safe Schools Improvement Act of 2019. This bill amends the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 by adding various components such as prohibiting bullying or harassment "based on a student's actual or perceived race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or religion" (Safe Schools Improvement Act of 2019, para. 3). In other words, the bill would ensure that schools have comprehensive bullying policies. According to the Human Rights Campaign, the bill has been introduced in both the House of Representatives (May 9, 2019) and the Senate (September 25, 2019) ("Safe Schools Improvement Act | Human Rights Campaign," n.d.).

In addition to anti-bullying policies, GLSEN also supports the presence of a legally-protected Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) (GLSEN, 2018). Formerly known as Gay-

Straight Alliances, GSAs "are student-run organizations, typically in a high school or middle school, which provide a safe place for students to meet, support each other, and talk about issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression" ("What is a GSA," n.d., para. 1). GSAs provide "safe and affirming" spaces for LGBTQ students, which is especially important for those who might not otherwise have one (i.e. family is unaccepting or unsupportive at home) ("GLSEN 2017 National School Climate Survey," 2017, p. 56). And although research is mixed as to whether or not having a GSA actually leads to less bullying in the school, there is a direct correlation between having a GSA and "positive well-being among LGBTQ students" (Earnshaw et al., 2017, p. 3). Heck, Flentje, & Cochran (2011) find that GSAs are "associated with long term effects on mental health outcomes" (as cited in Alex Wagaman, 2016, p. 396), and positive effects are possible even if students do not participate in the GSA (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010 as cited in Alex Wagaman, 2016).

Students Express a Need for a GSA

A few years ago, I wanted to start a GSA at my middle school. I anticipated some barriers, but also knew that our school met the criteria for the club to be protected by law. After an initial meeting, I knew that getting my students involved would be a crucial step. They would be the ones impacted by this club, so their voices were the most important. I reached out to a few of my former students (then eighth-graders) who I knew would jump at the opportunity. They reached out to their friends, and the group expanded. They started a petition and scheduled a meeting with their principal all on their own. Unfortunately, the same issues arose for them as they did for me, and ultimately, we were unable to move forward with the GSA at that time.

A few years later, we have even more staff members who are adamant about starting a GSA. In their most recent meetings, they were told that there needs to be a need demonstrated

by the students. However, many LGBTQIA+ youth are still questioning their identities or do not feel safe confiding in an adult at home or at school. Freire (2000) expresses that the oppressed must be liberators of their own oppression, but that fear can keep them from doing so. So, we turned to the most trusted people we could: former students who are LGBTQIA+. Below, they advocate for current and future middle school students who would benefit from a GSA the way they would have when they were their age. These are samples from letters written in their own words.

Student One:

> An argument I continue to hear is that middle schoolers are to young to be "exposed" to the LGBT community, an idea which could not be any more wrong. From a young age, I always knew there was something different about me, but I couldn't name it. I had no idea what I felt like and so I thought it was bad and forced myself to shove it down and to act as I thought I should. At that time, it bred unhappiness, but even after learning about myself, I was still hurt by my previous lack of knowledge. I deeply resented the way I acted and thus resented anyone who acted the same. If I had KNOWN more about gender when I was younger, I would not have firstly stigmatized myself and then others. Concepts of what is "normal" still affect me and cause me to judge others, which could have been avoided if I was taught that there is no such thing as normality.

Student Two:

> Middle school is a time for everyone to figure out who they are and experiment with things they like. As part of that search of self, some students find themselves questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity. This is a perfectly normal, valid thing that shouldn't be swept under the rug or hidden in the back corner of the room. The process of finding your identity is really hard, especially when you don't have the words to describe what you're feeling. GSA helps kids find out who they are and provides them with resources… I started questioning my sexual orientation during middle school. I would've loved to have a space where I could be supported during my process of questioning and eventually accepting myself. A space where I could learn more about queer history and this whole community I was now apart of. I would've loved a space where I could connect with my fellow LGBTQ+ students and allies. It would've created a great opportunity for new friendships (Goodman, 2020).

Student Three:

> I remember watching the group of students banding together to attempt to bring a GSA to the middle school a few years back, and the district denied it for what at the time appeared to be no reason. I remember hearing these students vent about the inability to do anything, and the roadblocks they were up against. I remember listening to the things [our

> district's] kids said, and still say to this day. The GSA is portrayed as this scary collection of students who are outside the norm, and that is honestly de-humanizing. What I found with the GSA at the high school was a safe space, with people who treated everyone the same, well, the same is not right. Fairly is the better word. The [high school] GSA, with no exaggeration, is one of the best things I've ever been a part of.

What an Inclusive Curriculum Might Look Like

In addition to comprehensive bullying policies and GSAs, students also benefit from inclusive curricula. We need to make space for *all* students in the classroom, and we need to do so by illuminating their cultures, beliefs, and values, not by indoctrinating them with those of the dominant power. We need to create inclusive curricula which highlight positive representations of the LGBTQ+ community in literature, in history, and in current events. We should recognize and celebrate their contributions to society.

This necessary change is rooted in the ideals of respect and freedom for our students. In order to respect our students and everything that they are, we need to provide opportunities for them to *be* those things. By actively disregarding that we have students who are LGBTQIA+, we are disrespecting their freedoms. Schools posit that teachers are to remain neutral in their values and beliefs, but as Freire (2000) states, "I cannot be a teacher without exposing who I am" (p. 87). I became a teacher to help all students feel safe, encouraged, and empowered. This means exposing who I am and doing the things that will help students feel that way. The current climate of our schools-- at least those which opt not to acknowledge a portion of their populations-- are not providing any of these securities for their LGBTQIA+ students. And to "remain neutral" is to perpetuate the oppression of their voices.

Our current system of education does not do justice to Freire's (2000) ideals of mutual "respect" and "freedom" between teacher and student (p. 70). I must show equal respect to my students by validating their experiences, no matter how "controversial" others may try to make

them feel. Schneider Kavanagh (2016) cites Banks (2004), Gay (2004b), and Sleeter (2005) when discussing the correlation between a "pluralistic curriculum representing the diversity of the public" and scholars' use of this "same logic" when "arguing for LGBTQ content integration" (p. 98). Given this view, these scholars would likely take issue with schools' claims that they do not address LGBTQ matters in an effort to reflect societal norms and values (Vare & Norton, 2004, McFarland & Dupuis, 2001 as cited in Frank & Cannon, 2009). It seems as though if schools truly wanted to reflect the public, they would diversify their curricula to represent the backgrounds of their students, thus leading to a safer and more inclusive place for LGBTQ youth.

This is especially important in my work because the role of an English Language Arts teacher, specifically, can make a huge difference in the lives of LGBTQ students (Page, 2017; Schneider Kavanagh, 2016). By introducing LGBTQ-themed content (such as literature with a gay or trans main character) into the curriculum, Page (2017) argues, students who identify as such have the opportunity to "feel more safe, are absent less frequently, and feel more connected to their schools; they also feel more accepted by their peers" (para. 8).

California has required by law that their schools' curricula include

> ...a study of the role and contributions of both men and women, Native Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, European Americans, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans, persons with disabilities, and members of other ethnic and cultural groups, to the economic, political, and social development of California and the United States of America, with particular emphasis on portraying the role of these groups in contemporary society. (California Department of Education, 2020)

We must look to California as a model to say that if they require the whole state to have an inclusive curriculum, then we, as one small district, can find a way to represent our students as well. After all, if students do not have the opportunity to learn about and work with peers from diverse backgrounds, then how can we expect them to grow and contribute to society as adults?

They must be able to work collaboratively with people in their communities and work spaces and find value in their varying perspectives.

Katherine W. Phillips (2014) is honest in expressing the drawbacks of diversity in teamwork: "discomfort, rougher interactions, lack of trust, and greater perceived interpersonal conflict" to name a few (Phillips, 2014, para. 2). However, her research supports the overwhelmingly greater need for diversity and how it substantially improves the quality of society in various facets. Phillips' (2014) research supports that more diverse groups in the work field lead to more creative solutions. She also expresses that people can change the way they think by just being exposed to diversity (Phillips, 2014). So, why would we not use that logic in the classroom? We should be exposing our students to as much diversity as possible, so that not only can students celebrate the things that make them diverse, but they can also expand their worldviews and ways of thinking.

By actively excluding our LGBTQ students from our school curricula and anti-bullying policies, we are reinforcing societal norms that cause the discomfort, rough interactions, and lack of trust noted in Phillips' research. Making LGBTQ content a regular, everyday part of the curriculum validates our students' experiences, helping LGBTQ students feel more comfortable and confident in themselves and encouraging non-LGBTQ students to become more accepting.

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Chapter 4

Design

Purpose

Many public school districts have adopted the narrative that they must remain neutral on political matters. Since we serve the public, staff members must not show bias toward any particular issue. That begs the question: what exactly is neutrality? As we discovered in Chapter Three, "to be neutral is to collaborate with whatever is going on" (Zinn, 2002). Our current laws in education do not do enough to support our LGBTQ+ students, so by remaining "neutral", or doing nothing to address this, we are affirming that it is acceptable to exclude a whole population of our students from reaching their full potentials-- the truest contradiction to what it means to be a teacher. As educators and care givers to children, we cannot continue to collaborate with the systems of oppression acting against our LGBTQIA+ students.

The purpose of this program is to educate district administrators, community members, and school staff about how lack of representation is not neutrality, but rather promoting the oppression that historically disenfranchised peoples have experienced over time. The primary focus of each session would be to highlight the risks faced by our LGBTQIA+ students, the positive outcomes of representation in our schools, and the concrete steps we can take in order to create safe, supportive, and life-affirming spaces for our students.

Through this program, administrators, community members, and staff would understand that the implementation of inclusive curricular and extracurricular activities could save students' lives. Although we come from various backgrounds and may not agree with others', one thing most of us have in common is a deeply-rooted care for the well-being of children. We are

responsible for ensuring that our school districts' children can see and experience our collective support.

Moreover, this program's purpose is to highlight the role of a public schools. Schools are not only the places where children learn about reading, writing, and arithmetic; they are also where students have the chance to become informed, active citizens. But they can only do that if their access to information is not squandered by our discomfort with people's identities. Our schools are microcosms of society. They bring together people of various backgrounds: religion, race, sexual orientation, gender, socio-economic status. And just like in society, people are often motivated to serve the majority. I believe that there is strong support for the LGBTQ+ community in conservative public school districts. We must remember that, though their voices may not be the loudest, they are there and deserve to be heard. All of our students-- not just those in the majority-- deserve to be affirmed and celebrated in their identities. And all of our students-- especially those in the majority-- are responsible for ensuring that no one's identity is a barrier to their chance at success.

By being exposed to different races, religions, sexual orientations, and gender identities when they are young, our white, heteronormative students can enter the "real world" with an understanding of the power and strength of diversity. They will know that as an auto mechanic, a lawyer, a professor, a secretary, or a CEO, they are responsible for advocating for the diversity and inclusivity of historically disenfranchised peoples. And they will know this because their teachers, counselors, nurses, secretaries, administrators, custodians, and support staff honored diversity in their school.

Process

Assembling a team:

Before beginning any presentations, I will first assemble a team of dedicated school educators (teachers, counselors, social workers, etc.) and a professionally trained LGBTQIA+ advocate (Mazzoni Center, GLSEN, etc.). The hired professional may be a part of all or select portions of this process. Together, we will look at the most recent National School Climate Survey from GLSEN in order to analyze the most recent data (the survey results used in this thesis are from 2017). We will also collect data from our students to determine the climate of our own school. We will use that data to understand what we are doing well and what we need to improve. In addition to the data from Chapter Three, this information will become part of the presentations. Finally, as a team, we will determine who should deliver which parts of the presentation. It is likely that a trained professional will present the more nuanced information about LGBTQIA+ youth; school counselors and social workers will present data on the mental health effects of bullying; and classroom teachers will present information about the need for inclusive practices in schools. This may vary depending on who is involved at which stages of the process.

Content, Method, and Organization

This program will be implemented in a four-step process. Each of the first three steps will address a different group of people to whom we will present our research, and the fourth will provide an opportunity to take action. This program is primarily aimed at public school districts, which must adhere to federal and state laws, but parts of it may be relevant to other schools, districts, or diocese as well.

Administrators

School district and building administrators must face the difficult task of serving their students, employees, and community stakeholders. When these members have conflicting or opposing views, administrators must navigate the delicate balance by making the best decision they can for all parties involved. Oftentimes, this means that at least one group will disagree with the decision made. However, this program's aim in not to undermine any one group's wishes, but to bring everyone into the conversation so we can make a collective decision to protect our students.

In the first step of the program, administrators will be introduced to the data from Chapter Three indicating the immediate need for inclusive programs in our schools. Many administrators are already aware that they may not exclude students based on their backgrounds, but they face pressure from a community who may not agree with which students should be visibly represented within the school environment. They want to be able to justify a need. The content of this presentation will serve as that justification. It is imperative that administrators recognize that this is not an issue that can be hidden or pushed aside in order to comfort those who oppose. Our LGBTQ+ families deserve comfort and protection too.

The data presented will include factors such as the negative effects of bullying and the positive effects of inclusivity through the implementations of a comprehensive bullying policy, a GSA, and an inclusive curriculum. The team will also provide data-supported steps and suggestion about how to move forward in a way that will best serve all of our students. We will suggest that parents and community members be educated on the need for all of our students' voices to be heard. This will take place through a community session, which would be best to

occur at a district school building during the evening hours when most members of the community are available to attend.

I have chosen to address the administration first because their approval is necessary in order for any next steps to occur. Michael Apple (1990) reminds us that institutions must be willing to see the "historical roots" of an issue and what this issue will lead to in the future because societal structures are constantly changing" (p. 132). We can no longer rest on the idea that this is how things have always been. With change-- like the increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ members in society-- comes the responsibility to integrate this change into institutions like schools. By illuminating the life-saving outcomes of positive LGBTQ-supportive changes in the school district, we can encourage administrators to become allies in the fight against injustice. If our community and staff members see that the district leaders are on board, then they too may be more open to learning about these changes.

The Community

Once administrators understand the dire need for a safe, supportive, and inclusive school environment in order to save and enhance the lives of our students, they will hopefully agree that the community must understand this as well. The second part of this program would include a community presentation focusing on educating the members of the district as to why it is so crucial that our district's schools include the representation and inclusion of LGBTQ+ peoples in its curricula and extra-curricular activities.

My district is very fortunate to have such strong parent engagement. Our parents and guardians are advocates for their children's education, and many have the ability to be active members of the school community. That said, we are not a very diverse school district, and we would all benefit from learning more about how we can support underrepresented members of

our community. In my program, I want parents and guardians to know that I understand that not everyone accepts or agrees with the LGBTQ+ community. As much as I would like us all to, I know that this would require more workshops and training than I am qualified to lead. Instead, my program will focus on encouraging the adults to understand that every child deserves to be seen, heard, and treated with dignity. Every child deserves to be represented and cared for and not made to feel ashamed of who they are.

When beginning the presentation, I would first show a video of a child being bullied at school. As caretakers of children, none of us want to see a child bullied. Participants would have a chance to journal about and discuss their reactions to the video. Then, following this video, I would show another example of a student who is bullied for being gay, bisexual, transgender, or gender nonconforming. Parents would again respond to this one, noting if there are any differences in their reactions or feelings. This may illuminate some implicit bias against the LGBTQ+ population.

It is important for everyone to understand that bullying does not just temporarily hurt a child's feelings; it can have lasting harmful effects. In this presentation, the team would convey the negative effects bullying causes as discussed in Chapter Three. Parents and guardians would be prompted to consider if the child in the video was their child. Would they want their child called names and beaten up? Would they want their child to feel unwanted because it is taboo to talk about being gay or transgender at school? What would they do if it was their child who was contemplating suicide because the bullying at school had gotten so bad?

In order for parents and guardians to understand how severe the negative outcomes of bullying and exclusion are, we will highlight some of the staggering statistics regarding the side effects of bullying and how much worse those effects can be for LGBTQ+ youth. We will then

stress how those statistics can be positively impacted by inclusive programs such as curricular changes, comprehensive bullying policies, and GSAs. It is crucial to remember that we cannot expect everyone to become activists in this journey-- nor should that be our goal. However, we can ask people to be understanding of the needs and rights of others. We can ask them to look at the statistics and imagine if their child was the one being denied the right to exist. What would they do to ensure that their child not only lived to see another day, but knew that their presence in the world was crucial?

Although, as discussed in Chapter One, parents' ideologies should not be imposed in a school setting, many decisions are made with them in mind (Dawkins, 2008). Thus, it is important to work collaboratively to improve our school environment. We must remember that, while our positions within the school community give us very different perspectives, educators and families ultimately have the same goal: to serve and support our children. I want my families to know that I am not attempting to forego their personal wishes, but that I have attended schools that do not openly support the LGBTQ+ community, and I know that our children deserve so much better. For eight of my thirteen years in Catholic school, I shared the theater stage with countless peers who did not come out as gay until after high school. I will ask my families to consider if they would want their own children to hide or be ashamed of who they are for so long. By inviting our community members into the process in the second step, they will know that their voices matter, and that they can be a part of the positive change in our district.

I have also chosen to present to the community early on because many teachers are reluctant to teach anything that may upset their students' parents and guardians. When I proposed an anti-bullying lesson to my colleagues which included a speech by a gay man, the

primary hesitation with teaching it was the fear of backlash from a conservative community. If we have the support of the very people that staff did not want to upset, then educators in the building will be much more willing to engage in the process.

Staff Training

In the final step of the process, once there is an understanding amongst administrators and community members of the need to serve *all* students, the staff will have the opportunity to be educated on this importance and help create safe and inclusive environments in their classrooms and around the school. The staff sessions will be divided into two parts.

Part One is a staff training. During this training, faculty members will be educated about the basic steps toward becoming a supportive adult for LGBTQIA+ students at school. The training will begin similarly to the community session. By watching videos about students being bullied, educators will have to confront their own biases toward who is being bullied and how they would react in various situations. By learning about the statistics, they will acknowledge that, despite their own potential discomfort with teaching LGBTQ content, there are things they can do to save our students' lives.

Hopefully, this will encourage the participants to want to make positive changes in their own classroom practices. Simple actions like asking for and using students' preferred pronouns or putting a Safe Zone sticker on their doors are ways to affirm students' identities and let them know that they are supported at school.

In Part Two of the workshop, staff members will work in committees to learn about and develop specific content to increase supportive practices at school. This could take place at any point after the first training as long as the team has assembled all necessary materials and staff members are available to attend. During the session, each committee will focus on one of the

following tasks: creating curricular resources, registering for and creating a GSA, drafting a proposal for a comprehensive bullying policy, and establishing a positive school environment.. These materials, particularly the curricular resources, could then be shared with others not in attendance, and some groups may decide to make their work ongoing.

Many staff members-- like members of the community-- may have conflicting political or religious beliefs with the lives of the LBGTQ+ community. I firmly believe that to choose to be a public school educator is to choose to welcome *all* students with open arms; however, there may be some educators who have not come to this realization. While there is no room for intolerance or exclusion in school, I am choosing to encourage staff members to adopt these practices rather than advocating for them to be mandated. In my experience, people who have been given directives to do something outside of their comfort zones have gone into the experiences with negative mindsets. This early on in the process, I want my colleagues to be open-minded and positive about this experience. As Posner (2003) states, "teachers must develop at least a minimal degree of positive feeling on the part of the students toward the subject matter" (p. 182). If my colleagues are the students of this professional development, I want them to walk away feeling positively about being a part of this change.

I will choose to recommend Part One of the training to be mandatory for all school faculty while asking for volunteers to attend Part Two. However, depending on the atmosphere of each school, there is flexibility in how these sessions can be offered. Below are some ways staff may be invited to attend:

1. Both events are voluntary and take place outside of school hours for any/all district employees to attend.

2. Both events are mandatory and take place during a Professional Development day for only school faculty (particularly those who directly interact with children for large portions of the day) to attend.
    a. The morning can focus on the training and the afternoon can focus on committee work.
    b. While the training may be mandatory for educators, an invitation can be extended to other staff members such as cafeteria workers, custodians, secretaries, etc. who are interested in attending.
3. Part One is mandatory for faculty/staff (during school hours) while part two is voluntary (during or outside of school hours).
4. Both parts are voluntary either outside of school hours or during a Professional Development day in which staff members choose various sessions to attend.

Learning Theories

Throughout this program, participants will be asked to break outside of their traditional ways of thinking and put themselves in the shoes of our students and their families whose lives are at stake. Utilizing this behavioral model requires that participants use what they have learned to change their behaviors, specifically that they choose actions which will support, not further oppress, our LGBTQ+ students (Posner, 1995). Even if the steps are small, they must continue to move in the direction of inclusion, and each of the groups presented to has an important role to play.

Each target audience is expected to adapt their knowledge into actions of support. Administrators will use their knowledge of data and statistics to support and help foster school- and district-wide initiatives, such as a comprehensive bullying policy and a GSA. The

community will use their empathy to support curricular decisions that showcase LGBTQ+ contributions throughout history. School staff will use their training to actually implement these measures in their classrooms through curricular and extracurricular activities and daily interactions with students.

While the workings of a school district are messy and imperfect, we must put aside our differences and do what we know is best for our children. If we can come together and each play our part, then we can model for our students what it means to be a good citizen. We can show them how to protect and fight for the most oppressed among us, and we can do this while saving lives. Our children deserve it.

Curriculum Plan

Event	Target Audience	Topics
Initial Presentation	District Administrators	➢ Values of public education ➢ Statistics on LGBTQ youth ○ Self-harm ○ Attendance ○ Outcomes of supportive school environment ➢ Inclusive programs ○ Curriculum ○ GSA ➢ Bullying Policy ○ Generic vs. Comprehensive
Community Session	Parents, Guardians, Community members	➢ The role of empathy ○ What if this were your child? ■ Videos ■ Case Studies ➢ Statistics on LGBTQ youth ○ Self-harm ○ Attendance ○ Outcomes of

		supportive school environment ➢ My role as a supportive educator ○ What if I did not step in? ➢ Benefits of inclusion for all students ➢ How to support our students ○ Do not be the one to make that phone call.
Staff Training Part 1	Teachers, Counselors, Nurses, Support Staff, Related Services Staff, Cafeteria Staff, Bus Drivers, District/Building Substitute Teachers, Coaches	➢ Pre-Assessment: Implicit Bias ➢ The role of empathy ○ What if this were one of our students? ■ Videos ■ Case Studies ○ How can we stop this from happening? ➢ Statistics on LGBTQ youth ○ Self-harm ○ Attendance ○ Outcomes of supportive school environment ➢ Experienced educators who have seen the impact of inclusivity
Staff Training Part 2	Teachers, Counselors, Nurses, Support Staff, Related Services Staff, Cafeteria Staff, Bus Drivers, District/Building Substitute Teachers, Coaches	➢ Let's Get to Work! ○ Inclusive curriculum ○ GSA ○ Comprehensive bullying policy ○ Positive, supportive materials and resources

Day One: Presenting to Administrators

Objective: Administrators will be able to understand and identify the harmful impacts of silence around and exclusion of

- Administrators may include:
    - Superintendent
    - Assistant Superintendent
    - Director of Curriculum
    - Building Principals and Assistant Principals
    - School Board of Directors

Essential Question:
Why is it important to foster a supportive and inclusive environment for our LGBTQIA+ students, and what are the consequences if we do not?

Materials Used:
- Journal/paper and writing utensils for each attendee
- Presentation (via PowerPoint, Google Slides, etc.) detailing the statistics from the most recent GLSEN National School Climate Survey and school-conducted survey
- News articles about bullying

Procedure
- Introductions
    - The designated leader will begin with a brief introduction about the background to this project and the assembling of the team.
    - Each team member will introduce who they are and their role in the district (if applicable) and in the training.
- Journaling
    - Prompt: What resources does our school district provide to support and protect our LGBTQIA+ students? To what extent is the district willing to go to show visible support for these students? Are you aware of any complaints or reports of bullying against a LGBTQ student? If so, what actions were taken? If not, what steps might you take if you received a complaint?
- Presentation
    - Share news reports of children who were bullied
        - Depending on the size of the group, we may look at one together or break off into small groups-- each group reading a different article and sharing out with the whole group.
    - Transition into statistics regarding risks to LGBTQ youth
        - Lower GPA than heterosexual peers
        - Higher chance of not finishing high school than heterosexual peers

        - Higher risk of self-harm than heterosexual peers
        - Higher risk of suicide
    - Data supporting inclusive programs in schools
        - Correlation between presence of GSA and "positive well-being among LGBTQ students" (Earnshaw et al., 2017)
        - According to GLSEN (2011) and Kosciw et al. (2016) as cited in Page (2017), for LGBTQ+ students, the presence of a LGBTQ character in literature can lead to:
            - Feeling safer
            - Fewer absences
            - Stronger connection to school
            - Feeling more accepted by peers
        - As seen in the GLSEN 2017 National School Climate Survey, schools with comprehensive bullying policies led to:
            - "Lowest levels of victimization"
            - Lower risk of suicide attempts
- Proposal
    - Presenting to parents
        - Build empathy and understanding around the need for a more inclusive space.
    - Staff
        - Two-Part Training
            - Part One: Educate all staff members with the basic understandings of being supportive of our LGBTQIA+ students (see under *Day Three: Staff Training Part One*)
            - Part Two: Staff would break into smaller groups to work on various aspects of the plan (see under *Day Four: Staff Training Part Two*)
    - Rewriting the district's bullying policy
        - Enumerate the bullying policy to include bullying "based on a student's actual or perceived race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or religion" as proposed by the Safe Schools Improvement Act of 2019.
    - Creation of a Gender and Sexuality Alliance at the Middle School level
    - Allow for inclusive curricula to be implemented across subject areas

Day Two: Community Session

Objectives:

- **Community members will tap into their empathy in order to better understand the need for LGBTQIA+ inclusion at school.**
- **Using this empathy, they will recognize that even if their religious or political beliefs do not align with supporting the LGBTQ+ community, there are parents and guardians in the audience/at our schools whose children deserve to be safe and supported by their teachers and peers.**
- **They will understand that our role in a public school is to provide resources and support for all of our students and that no one should be excluded.**

- Community members may include:
    - Parents/guardians
    - Students
    - Relatives interested in supporting the LGBTQIA+ community
    - Residents of the district municipalities
    - School personnel (they will also receive their own training)

Essential Question:
Why is it important to foster a supportive and inclusive environment for our LGBTQIA+ students, and how do we part with our own discomfort to make room for the acceptance of all?

Materials Used:

- Paper and writing utensils for each attendee
- Presentation (via PowerPoint, Google Slides, etc.) detailing the statistics from the most recent GLSEN National School Climate Survey
- Surveys (Google forms or other software)

Procedure

- As audience members enter, they will complete a survey asking how likely they are to support their children being taught about backgrounds such as race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability, etc.
- Show video of student being bullied for reason other than being in the LGBTQ+ community
    - Think, Pair, Share-- Ask community members to:
        - Think and write about their reactions to the video
        - Tell their neighbor(s) in the audience what they wrote
        - Volunteer to share out with the group
- Show video of student being bullied for being in the LGBTQ+ community
    - Think, Pair, Share-- Ask community members to:
        - Think and write about their reactions to the video

        - Tell their neighbor(s) in the audience what they wrote
        - Volunteer to share out with the group
- Introductions
    - The designated leader will begin with a brief introduction about the background to this project and the assembling of the team.
    - Each team member will introduce who they are and their role in the district (if applicable) and in the session.
- Presentation (present in any order)
    - Qualitative Data
        - Reading/watching LGBTQ youth's personal stories
        - Listening to guest speakers share their experiences in school
        - Reading anonymous testimonials from current or former students of the school district
    - Quantitative Data
        - Viewing statistics about LGBTQ+ bullying in schools
            - Lower GPA than heterosexual peers
            - Higher chance of not finishing high school than heterosexual peers
            - Higher risk of self-harm than heterosexual peers
            - Higher risk of suicide
    - Additional data supporting inclusive programs in schools
        - Correlation between presence of GSA and "positive well-being among LGBTQ students" (Earnshaw et al., 2017)
        - For LGBTQ+ students, the presence of a LGBTQ character in literature can lead to
            - Feeling safer
            - Fewer absences
            - Stronger connection to school
            - Feeling more accepted by peers
        - Schools with comprehensive bullying policies led to
            - "Lowest levels of victimization"
            - Lower risk of suicide attempts
- Retake the survey indicating how likely participants are to support inclusive programs at school
    - Use this data to inform next steps.

Day Three: Staff Training Part One

Objectives:

- **Staff members will be able to identify why LGBTQIA+ inclusion in schools is important.**
- **Staff members will understand their roles in creating a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQIA+ students.**

➢ Staff members may include:
  - Bus Drivers
  - Cafeteria Staff
  - Coaches
  - Counselors
  - Nurses
  - Related Services Staff
  - Secretaries
  - Substitute Teachers (District employed)
  - Support Staff
  - Teachers

Essential Question:
What are the basic ways in which we can be positive, supportive resources for our LGBTQIA+ students?

Materials Used:

- ➢ Paper and writing utensils for each attendee
- ➢ Presentation (via PowerPoint, Google Slides, etc.) detailing the statistics from the most recent GLSEN National School Climate Survey
- ➢ Genderbread Friend
- ➢ List of terminology regarding gender identity and sexual orientation

Procedure (much of this will be similar to the community session. Different videos or data points may be used depending on the population)

- ➢ Show video of student being bullied for reason other than being in the LGBTQ+ community
  - Think, Pair, Share-- Ask staff members to:
    - Think and write about their reactions to the video
    - Tell their neighbor(s) at the training what they wrote
    - Volunteer to share out with the group
- ➢ Show video of student being bullied for reason other than being in the LGBTQ+ community
  - Think, Pair, Share-- Ask staff members to:
    - Think and write about their reactions to the video

        - Tell their neighbor(s) at the training what they wrote
        - Volunteer to share out with the group
- Introductions
    - The designated leaders will begin with a brief introduction about the background to this project and the assembling of the team.
    - Each team member will introduce who they are and their role in the district (if applicable) and in the training.
- Presentation (present in any order)
    - Qualitative Data
        - Reading/watching LGBTQ youth's personal stories
        - Listening to guest speakers share their experiences in school
        - Reading anonymous testimonials from current or former students of the school district
    - Quantitative Data
        - Viewing statistics about LGBTQ+ bullying in schools
            - Lower GPA than heterosexual peers
            - Higher chance of not finishing high school than heterosexual peers
            - Higher risk of self-harm than heterosexual peers
            - Higher risk of suicide
    - Additional data supporting inclusive programs in schools
        - Correlation between presence of GSA and "positive well-being among LGBTQ students" (Earnshaw et al., 2017)
        - For LGBTQ+ students, the presence of a LGBTQ character in literature can lead to
            - Feeling safer
            - Fewer absences
            - Stronger connection to school
            - Feeling more accepted by peers
        - Schools with comprehensive bullying policies led to
            - "Lowest levels of victimization"
            - Lower risk of suicide attempts
- So what can we do?
    - This is where the trained professional comes in. They will be able to give data-informed suggestions to best care for our students. In the absence of a trained professional, here are some simple steps to offer the staff:
        - Get to know the Genderbread friend!
        - Start the year by allowing students to introduce themselves (instead of calling out roll). This prevents the potential outing of a student whose chosen name does not match their legal name.

- Include pronouns in introductions. Ask who it is okay to use these pronouns in front of. This ensures that we are addressing students in the most respectful way possible while recognizing that they may not be out to everyone.
- Put a safe zone sticker on your classroom door. This signals students that you are a safe adult to talk to about LGBTQ+ matters.
- Ask students if they are happy and if they want others to be happy too.
    - Use this to guide a conversation about gender expression.
    - Use the “genderbread friend”
- Change classroom terminology. Instead of “boys and girls” or “ladies and gentlemen”, try some gendered-inclusive terms.
    - This can be something the group brainstorms together.

Day Four: Staff Training Part Two

Objectives:

- **Staff members will find or create resources to enhance inclusivity within various aspects of the school.**

Procedure

- Staff members will work in small groups to accomplish the following tasks:
    - Adapting current curricular lesson plans to be more inclusive
    - Creating a GSA
    - Proposing a comprehensive bullying policy
    - Acquiring materials and resources to create a positive school environment

Group One: Develop Inclusive Curriculum

- Understand that many curricula must be Board-approved. This is not a change in curriculum (though plans can be made for the next revision cycle), but rather enhancing current lesson plans.
- Depending on the number of participants, this may be one group or broken up into several.
- Group(s) will review the current curricula in place for each subject area. They will locate resources that will promote a positive view of the LGBTQIA+ students.
    - Literature (books, articles, authors)
    - Historical figures (politicians, civil rights activists, scientists, mathematicians)
    - Physical and mental health

Group Two: Create a GSA

- Understand that many schools have guidelines for club formation that must be adhered to. Seek administration's approval if necessary, but know the circumstances under which GSAs are protected by law.
- This group will be responsible for
    - Registering the GSA through GLSEN
    - Creating promotional posters
    - Creating an agenda for the first meeting (possibly the first few meetings)
        - After the group is established, students should take part in creating the agendas
        - Look into Community Outreach opportunities:
            - Colleges and Universities
            - Resource Centers
            - Business Centers
            - Churches/Church groups

Group Three: Propose a Comprehensive Bullying Policy

- Understand that some districts may already have a team responsible for this. Work in collaboration with district committees if appropriate.
- Look up district's current bullying policy to see if it enumerates the protection of students "based on a student's actual or perceived race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or religion" (Safe Schools Improvement Act of 2019)
- Write a letter to the Board of School Directors (or whomever approves the district's policy changes) proposing a comprehensive bullying policy.
    - Cite statistics about the detriments of not having one and the benefits of having one

Group Four: Creating a Positive School Environment

- Understand that, despite moving toward a more inclusive environment, not all schools will approve the use of school funds to purchase LGBTQ-inclusive materials.
- This group will be responsible for:
    - Materials and resources for the school:
        - Safe Zone stickers for classroom doors
        - Posters, buttons/pins, wristbands that promote inclusion
    - Physical Space-- Are there:
        - Gender-inclusive restrooms
        - Gender-inclusive locker rooms

Implementation

Creating an inclusive space for LGBTQIA+ students cannot be accomplished overnight. While some tasks-- such as putting a Safe Zone sticker on our doors or hanging positive posters in our classrooms-- are rather simple, others-- like changing the district's bullying policy or revising the curriculum-- may take more time, money, and convincing to get people on board. Thus, there are important frame factors to consider (Posner, 2003).

One consideration is the organization of the school district. Because there are so many perspectives to consider: administrators, community members, educators, (not to mention students), it is important to recognize that these groups often have conflicting views. I assembled my curriculum in the order I did to reflect whose "approval" was needed before proceeding to the next step. However, this may look different in other districts depending on whose opinion or support would be most valuable to have.

The organization of a district may be influenced by a cultural or political frame factor. For example, if those in charge have more conservative values or do not think LGBTQ+ inclusion is necessary to the district, then this program may be more difficult to carry out. The stakeholders and decision makers must find purpose behind each of these actions in order for them to be worth the district's time and resources.

In the event that all members are on board and eager to see this program through, an economic frame factor may still inhibit certain parts of it from being enacted. For example, hiring a professionally trained advocate and purchasing resources for the school will require ample funds that may not be available to the district. The program may need to be budgeted for prior to its implementation.

Chapter 5

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment of the Program

According to research, implementing LGBTQ-inclusive practices in schools will lead to fewer incidents of bullying, which in turn will result in higher levels of happiness and academic achievement and lower levels of depression and self-ham amongst LGBTQ+ students (GLSEN, 2018). In order to assess if each step of the program was effective, I will ask participants to complete a short questionnaire at the conclusion of their respective sessions. While each of these assessments is independently summative, they are formative in the overall process of presenting to members of the district. For example, if my administration reports that one aspect of the presentation was effective while another one was not, the team will have time to adapt the presentation in order to better appeal to our community in step two.

I will also formatively assess the effectiveness of the program within each of the presentations. By asking participants to record and share their reactions to videos and news articles, the team will be able to gauge how strongly the attendees feel about supporting our LGBTQ students through the proposed solutions. If we find that the group is still hesitant to engage, then we will modify our plans accordingly. We may show additional videos or open up the space for more commentary. These integrated assessments will make for a more authentic experiences (Posner, 2003), allowing participants to not feel forced into adopting this new mindset, but rather invited to take part in the opportunity presented to them.

Questionnaires

Administrators	1. What was your reaction to the statistics facing LGBTQ youth who are bullied in school? 2. After learning what schools can do to help, did you feel compelled to make the necessary changes? Explain. 3. Were there any parts of the presentation that made you feel as though these changes in curriculum, clubs, and district policies were not necessary? If so, explain.
Community Members	1. Walking into today's presentation, what was your opinion of teaching LGBTQ-inclusive content in school? 2. After hearing today's presentation, what is your opinion of teaching LGBTQ-inclusive content in school? a. If your opinion has changed, which part(s) of the presentation helped change your perspective? b. If your opinion has not changed, what would be helpful for you to know to better understand and support this initiative? 3. Would you support your child if they wanted to be a member of a GSA?
Staff Members	<u>Before the session:</u> 1) What do you know about the risks facing our LGBTQ+ youth? 2) On a scale of 1-5 (1 being very unlikely and 5 being very likely), rate the likelihood that you would intervene in the following situations: a) A student uses the phrase "That's so gay" to refer to something being stupid. b) Student A is bullying or harassing Student B based on Student B's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. c) A student walks into your class and says that there are only two genders: boy and girl. 3) How comfortable are you discussing LGBTQ-related content in your classroom? a) If you are uncomfortable, what are some factors contributing to this discomfort? <u>After the session:</u> 1) What questions or uncertainties do you still have about the risks facing our LGBTQ+ youth? 2) On a scale of 1-5 (1 being very unlikely and 5 being very likely), rate the likelihood that you would intervene in the following situations:

	a) A student uses the phrase "That's so gay" to refer to something being stupid. b) Student A is bullying or harassing Student B based on Student B's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. c) A student walks into your class and says that there are only two genders: boy and girl. 3) How comfortable are you discussing LGBTQ-related content in your classroom? a) If you are uncomfortable, what are some factors contributing to this discomfort? 4) What else would you like to have learned in this presentation? 5) How likely are you to use ask for students' preferred pronouns in the future? 6) How likely are you to put a Safe Zone sticker on your door indicating that you are a safe adult for LGBTQ youth to talk to?

In addition to assessing each of the groups in the sessions, I will also create a survey for educators who plan to implement this program in their own schools. This program was developed specifically for schools who have seen high incidences of bullying and harassment or whose administrations or district's families oppose the inclusion of the LGBTQ community in schools. Therefore, in order to measure if other educators had success implementing this program in their districts, I will ask them to complete this survey. The results will inform what changes can be made to the program.

Survey

Directions: Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the statements by placing a check in the appropriate box.					
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I felt knowledgeable about the risks faced by our LGBTQ students.					
Additional Comments:					
I was motivated to include my LGBTQ students through school curricula and extra-curricular activities.					
Additional Comments:					
I felt equipped to present to my administrators in order to advocate for necessary changes in our district.					
Additional Comments:					
I felt equipped to present to my district's community members in order to advocate for necessary changes in our district.					
Additional Comments:					
I felt equipped to present to my colleagues/staff in order to advocate for necessary changes in our school.					
Additional Comments:					

The changes made in my school had a positive impact on my students.					
Additional Comments:					
What successes did you have implementing this program?					
What challenges did you have implementing this program?					
What information was missing from the lesson plan that would have been helpful for you?					

Recommendations for Future Research

Over the course of this program, I researched the impacts that bullying and exclusion have on our LGBTQIA+ students. However, individuals represented by each of the letters in this acronym are affected very differently. If I were to continue my research, I would explore the ways that each group within the community was affected separately from the rest. For example, according to the GLSEN 2017 National School Climate Survey, transgender and gender nonconforming students "are at heightened risk for in-school discrimination" (p. 63). It is crucial to make sure that there are protocols and policies in place to protect these students by acknowledging and respecting each of their roles withing the LGBTQIA+ community and give them each visibility within our schools.

With further research, I would also dive more deeply into the negative experiences faced by LBGTQ+ students of color. The intersectionality of this group of youth causes further feelings of exclusion, especially within GSAs, even leading to "discourage[ment] from attending because they [did] not perceive their school's GSAs to be inclusive or useful" (GLSEN, 2018, p.

56). This would be particularly interesting to study in a predominately white institution, since students of color in these places are already vastly underrepresented. It is crucial that we are not letting out LGBTQ+ youth of color slip through the cracks.

Lastly, as briefly mentioned in this lesson plan, I would like to explore the possibilities of creating gender-neutral restrooms and locker rooms in school. Though they were added as a possible exploration for the fourth group in the staff training, this thesis did not provide enough research on the effects of students in schools with or without them. These facilities would also take additional planning and financial resources to establish, and therefore may require more research and support before proposing them to conservative communities.

Although there are so many areas yet to be explored in order to better serve our LGBTQIA+ students, many school districts are not even providing the basics. If schools implemented inclusive curricula, created GSAs, and protected all students under a comprehensive bullying policy, we would have much safer, happier, and healthier students. And as public educators, our primary goal should be to advocate for the well-beings of our students. By lifting the voices of our students who are continuously oppressed, we help to give them the tools they need to thrive in school and beyond.

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APPENDIX

Helpful Resources

Bullying articles and videos:

- *Nbcnews.com: "*A 12-year-old New Jersey boy was bullied for being gay, lawsuit says. He died by suicide" by Minyvonne Burk
- *Abcnews.go.com: "*"He loved everybody': Alabama community picks up pieces after bullied gay teen takes his own life, family says" by Karma Allen
- "'He was sunshine': 15-year-old boy dies by suicide after he was bullied for being gay" by Chelsea Robinson
- *Youtube.com:* "9-Year-Old Boy Dies by Suicide After He Was Bullied For Being Gay" NBC Nightly News
- *Youtube.com:* "Bullied to Death in America's Schools" ABC News
- *Youtube.com:* "Target of LGBT Bullying in Ohio School Tells His Story" ALCU
- *Youtube.com:* "Dylan Marron & LGBTQ Youth Get Real About Bullying" GLAAD
- *Vanderbilt University:* "LGBTQ studenst feel safer at schools with gay-straight alliances" by Joan Brasher
- *GLAAD*: "lgbtq youth share their stories, offer advice to adults to end bullying" by Clare Kenny

Genderbread Friend
The Safe Zone Project "Genderbread Person"

Use GLSEN's Website to:

- Find the most up-to-date School Climate Surveys
- Get more information on comprehensive school policies
- Register a GSA
- Search for inclusive classroom curriculum ideas

Blank School Climate Survey

- GSA Network: gsanetwork.org