



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

History in Public Schools

LEILA RUPP

When I was a kid, my favorite books were those young adult biographies of famous people, that spent most of their pages on the person's childhood. I think of them as those little orange biographies because the bindings of the library copies were bright orange. I remember seeking out the few that were about women, I devoured them. I remember Jane Adams, Harriet Tubman and Elizabeth Blackwell. I know there were a few more but I think they were mostly presidents' wives or other properly domestic women. It wasn't until I started college in 1968 that I was able to articulate what I had long experienced. History, as I had learned it, was almost all about elite white men.

The resurgence of the women's movement at that time steered me to women's history as a field of study, and the world never looked the same again. It was about transforming what counted as history so that the things that women of all classes and races were doing mattered. It made history new and exciting. It made it matter to me personally, and that's exactly what queer history does: makes history new and exciting, expands what counts as history and makes it matter. Educational activists talk about the need to provide students with both windows out into an unfamiliar world and mirrors that reflect students' own diverse lives. Windows and mirrors.

For too long, queer students like students of color, poor and working-class students, first-generation American students and still even girls have confronted a lot more windows than mirrors in their history classes. But that's changing in many places, like California. At a time when other states are forbidding teachers to mention anything remotely concerned with same-sex attraction and are policing what bathrooms trans kids must use, California is implementing the fair, accurate, inclusive and responsible education act known as the FAIR Act.

The law, passed in 2011, adds lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans and persons with disabilities to the list of those including men and women, Native Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, European Americans and members of other ethnic and cultural groups whose contributions must be included in classroom instruction and materials. Making this a reality in 2016, the California Department of Education revised the K-12 history/social science framework in the spirit of the FAIR Act. A lot of hard work and pressure went into the revision, which is in the words of historian and activist Don Romesburg, "completely groundbreaking."

There is substantial content in second grade, in fourth grade, fifth grade, eighth grade and ninth grade, 10th grade, 11th and 12th grades. It is by far the most LGBT-inclusive curriculum in the country, and one other states are hoping to emulate. So imagine for a moment, what it would be like to have been in second grade discussing families, and your teacher does not make any assumption about the gender of your

parents. Imagine learning in fourth grade about Harvey Milk, the first openly gay public official. Imagine hearing about gender crossing on the frontier in the fifth grade and two-spirit people in Native American societies.

Imagine learning about same-sex encounters between men in urban centers, Boston marriages between women in colleges and settlement houses and the rise of the LGBT movement in the 1970s in 11th grade. All of this and more is in the California framework, and it's a powerful example of what you can do in your own classroom, wherever you teach. Because I had those little orange biographies, I know what a difference it made to learn something about women in the past but just imagine every student, including queer students, seeing mirrors as well as windows. In a moment, you'll hear from Felicia Perez, who taught history in the Los Angeles school system. As you listen to this episode, just imagine having a teacher like Felicia when you were in high school.

I'm Leila Rupp, and this is Queer America, a special series from Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. LGBTQ history has been largely neglected in the classroom, but it's necessary to give students a fuller history of the United States and to help them understand how that history shaped the society they live in. This podcast provides a detailed look at how to incorporate important cultural touchstones, notable figures and political debates into an inclusive U.S. history curriculum. In each episode, we explore a different topic, walking you through historical concepts, suggesting useful source material and offering practical classroom exercises.

Talking with students about sexual and gender identity can be emotional and complex. This podcast is a resource for navigating those challenges so teachers and students can discover the history and comprehend the legacy of Queer America. In this episode, Felicia Perez and Emily Hobson talk about how they got into teaching and provide practical advice for educators, like how to address classroom realities such as high-stakes testing when incorporating queer history into your curriculum. They also suggest useful tips and strategies like always asking who is included and who is left out of historical narratives. Here are Felicia Perez and Emily Hobson.

EMILY HOBSON

Hi, so this is Emily. I wanted to first ask you, Felicia, what made you want to become a teacher and what were your first few years like as a queer person in the classroom?

FELICIA PEREZ

Thanks, Emily. I grew up in a pretty traditional Mexican family in the city of Orange, in Orange County, which is Southern California and one of the things that both of my parents kept telling over and over and really drilling into my sister and I's heads was that we had to both get a career that was going to be self-sustaining but also being of service to the larger Latino community, to the community in Orange, to our family. I came out when I was 14 years old. I found, discovered and fell madly in love with my first girlfriend in the eighth grade at my Catholic private school and I opened up to my parents that I was incredibly sad because I had been dumped by my girlfriend and that explained why my best friend, Christine, was no longer coming over on a daily basis.

So that immediately put my parents in somewhat of a tailspin. My mother didn't speak to me for several weeks, didn't really know what to say. She's a pretty strong Catholic; I come from a very strong Catholic

background. Me coming out was definitely a challenge. What subsequently happened is the absence of my parents being able to talk to me; they sent me to someone who could, and it was an amazing therapist, and she was wonderful and essentially told me that there was nothing wrong with me but that there were definitely problems with the world and so, of course, I wanted to be a therapist. I wanted to be a psychologist, psychiatrist. That was my calling.

I went to school at UC Santa Barbara and I was a psychology major until the point I learned that the major would require a substantial amount of math—and math is not my friend. So I changed my major to being a sociology major and cultural anthropology minor, looking at Chicano studies and women's studies and what was not existent then but several LGBTQIA courses. It became very real to me that I needed to do some activist organizing. After I graduated from college, I started working at the ACLU of Southern California in Los Angeles and I worked for Californians for Justice, a statewide organization. I had about four, five years of working on policy change to make cultural change and it wasn't working.

California has a proposition process whereby, if you get a particular number, I believe it's 100,000 signatures for a measure to be placed on the ballot, it is placed on the ballot. It just so happened that in the late '90s and early thousands, it was a lot of "against" propositions. This would be Proposition 8, which was against same-sex marriage recognition in California or Proposition 209, previous to that, about immigration, access to social services and public services, and I bring these up because I was working on defeating them and we were always losing. Being young, in my 20s, having my sort of very left, progressive values, it was really hard to sustain that work that I was doing at the time.

I remembered that what I really felt was going to actually make the change for my life and for LGBTQIA members in the future was to actually focus on youth because I love the kids, that's really where everything begins and breaks down at the same time. I decided to be a teacher. Whatever is in a classroom, much like whatever is in a museum, much like whatever is in cultural spaces, is what we value as a community, that is how we should act and treat one another and what kinds of information we're learning. The absence of programs or systems to prevent bullying, the absence of systemized ways to have more inclusive curriculum and spaces then has an effect.

That's where I wanted to be. I wanted to be where things begin and when I decided to go into teaching, I decided to stay in Los Angeles and the first school that I taught at was called Los Angeles Senior High School—it's on Olympic and Crenshaw. It is the oldest high school in Los Angeles Unified School District, which is the second largest school district in the country. Because it was going to be supportive of me, it was going to be supportive of the kind of work I was doing and they were really responsive in my interview to the type of teaching and the way that I was going to be teaching.

I made it very clear that I'm going to be teaching who I am and that's also a part of what's going to be taught in the classroom; how we teach is also what we teach and who we are is also taught in the classroom. I was bringing my full self, they were really excited about that—and I mean "they" as in the administration and the principal at the time. My colleagues, not so much because I just didn't "look" like the teachers that were already there. I want to give you a description here. I have had a shaved head since I was 18 and it's not like a half an inch or an inch, it's like pretty much gone. I am pretty heavily tattooed and that started at that time.

I am not gender-normative in my presentation or dress. Just about, let me think, yes, all but one piece of clothing that I wear on a daily basis is literally labeled, designed and sold as men's clothing. I do go by "they," "them," "she," "her." That's the presentation that I have with my gender and have had most of my life. I started teaching when I was 24 years old, as a very young person; I'm roughly 10 years older than the people I am teaching. I'm fresh out of college. I don't have any money for this job. I have a T-shirt on that has a collar, which was a new thing that Old Navy was providing at the time, which was really nice and I didn't have a briefcase because I didn't have no money for no briefcase so I had a nice backpack. Shaved head, backpack, a few tattoos.

Kind of looks like a 14-year-old boy but says they're a 24-year-old girl. What this meant is that I would go use the faculty restroom and so I would get chased by male faculty members saying, "Young man, get out of there." I would also then be chased out of the restroom by female faculty who are like, "What are you doing in here, get out of here." This happened quite a bit. It would also happen in the hallways and on the general campus, especially if I stayed late at night. I would see a bunch of security workers with like, walkie-talkies, running towards me, "Stay there, stay there." I'm like, "Oh gosh, what's happening, what's happening?"

Then, as they get closer, they would stop and one of them would get on the walkie-talkie and say, "Oh, false alarm, it's just Perez." I would get that a lot. "It's just Perez, it's just Perez." At the same time, my students were great. I had a wonderful relationship with them. It doesn't matter how you dress and what you look like in order to get respect in the classroom. It matters how you treat your students and so that's what I leaned into, and that's what worked. And I want to say that at the end of my first year, I asked that group of students that sort of helps you take your classroom down for the summer, "So okay, I want to know, what's my name on campus, like how am I referred to?"

They looked at each other kind of like, "I don't know, does she really want to know?" I was like, "I can take it. I can take it," and one of them said, "Okay. You're the gay-bull teacher with tattoos," and I just smiled from ear to ear and was like, "That is exactly who I want to be." If you're a public school teacher, you know that you don't get business cards, which is actually what you need—especially on parent conference night. I made my own business cards that said, "Felicia T. Perez," and underneath it said, in italicized font, "Gay-bull teacher with tattoos" and that's what I passed out to parents and I wore that definitely with a badge of honor.

When I left L.A. Senior High to move on to another campus called NOW Academy at the RFK Community Schools, I publicly had a new name, and the new name was "Teacher of the Year" in 2010.

EMILY HOBSON

You and I both incidentally grew up in Orange County, certainly throughout our childhood and adolescence, a very conservative part of the state. In the late 1970s, California had seen another set of right-wing initiatives that were sponsored by a state legislator, John Briggs, who came from Orange County, from Fullerton. Proposition 6, which was commonly referred to as "the Briggs Initiative," would have allowed school boards to fire teachers who were gay or lesbian or who supported gay or lesbian rights. I'm wondering if you can think a little bit about your mom's own experience 40 years in education herself and in Orange County.

Did your parents or your mother in particular, as a teacher, ever talk about the impact of that campaign? Do you think that it shaped her own perspective or concerns about you going into the classroom as an out teacher even though it was some 20 years later?

FELICIA PEREZ

She didn't share with us growing up the difficulties and the hardships that she had in her own career. I think because she didn't want us to feel like we couldn't do something. I think she didn't tell us about her own challenges because she wanted us to remain thinking that our ability to do whatever we wanted was in fact, unstoppable and absolutely possible. It wasn't actually until I became an educator and we were at a conference together about inclusivity and she was ... left the classroom and was now a principal and that we started to have a conversation about what it was like for her as an educator because she was now having to defend LGBTQIA students as an administrator on campus and she was having to defend the need for a queer student union or a LGBTQIA student group on campus.

At that time, she explained to me that as a young Mexican American at that time, self-identifying as Mexican American in the late '60s and '70s as an educator, that she was literally hired as a PE teacher to "Deal with the unruly animal Mexicans on campus." I mean, I think, what's happening here is that the propositions and laws and sort of political culture, influences whether or not people feel fear or support to change and move certain things.

The time that we were in, in the early '90s, the time that we were in in the early '70s, and the time that we are in right now are very reminiscent of one another. I have a lot of fear of what you can say and stand up for. That was definitely one of those things that was happening there and so one of the reasons why I went into education was because I figured, if I couldn't win at these propositions to make change, if I treated each one of my students as their own individual campaign, right: Feliz feels good about himself, Kimmelyn goes to college, Juan Rico is going to come out and Theora is going to Gaud College successfully even with his single mom at home. These were individual campaigns they could improve, my feeling like change was possible.

That's what I did and I think mom saw me doing that and we ended up talking a lot about our theory about education and what we were doing and especially in a social study setting, there's a lot of politics and culture that happens in the secondary setting, in social studies but in our conversations, I think we're also going to point out that every single subject has the ability to shift and change culture when it comes to inclusivity of LGBTQIA community issues. I have a question for you, Emily. You didn't become a high school secondary teacher—you're a professor in higher ed and a professor of queer history in particular. We talked about what it's like to be in the lower levels of education; what would you say was behind why you became a professor of queer history in particular?

EMILY HOBSON

The origin for it for me was really social movement history, radical movement history and that interest also comes out of my own personal story and my relationship with my parents. Growing up also in Orange County in a conservative time, right, the Reagan/Bush years, with parents who had themselves coming of age and becoming adults in the 1960s, really I think seen their knowledge of the world and their understanding transformed by being able to witness and support the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, also that era of the women's liberation movement. They were very interested in

me learning some of that history.

I often talk about how much impact on me it was to watch the *Eyes on the Prize* TV series on PBS with them as a kid. Your mother was an educator in the K-12 setting. My dad was also a college professor and he wanted to use parts of *Eyes on the Prize* in his own teaching so he recorded it and he also watched it at home with me and on the VCR recording that we are watching, he would stop it if I had a question and explain it to me or just reflect on it. I regularly saw my parents well up with tears, with some of the scenes that we were watching, I could see how they were thinking through their own history and I was, of course, learning it for the first time.

That was a very transformative moment for me. I was in middle school. I was beginning to kind of figure out some of my interests in the world. I was realizing that I was quite interested in history in general, also that I had the central motivation about kind of what's the history of how people have made transformative social change. And initially, after college, I also went into community organizing work. I worked at an organization called Californians for Justice, working to address the consequences in the early 2000s of the California High Stakes Exit Exam, which was effectively a graduation test for high school seniors.

It affected students individually of course and it also carried some consequences for schools in terms of their overall passage rates. More broadly, we were thinking about the impact of that exit exam on especially students of color, low-income students, immigrant students who were vastly underserved at the time. But I continue to have this very strong interest in social movement history and the ways that some kind of understanding of movement history might inform ongoing activism. I ultimately went back to graduate school with that interest in mind, wanting to do more research myself and writing and teaching in movement history.

Also thinking about kind of the fundamental structures and operations of race and ethnicity and gender and sexuality in class that both make movements necessary and also shape some of their terms. As I started to do at the graduate school level, I started to see very, very quickly that queer history, especially thinking about the 1960s, the emergence of gay liberation in some accounts is treated in this very static, isolated way as ... there's a narrative of the 1960s of everything coming apart, fractures, splintering. First, there's this unified movement and then it all fell apart because everyone retreated into these individual identities.

In looking at the actual sources themselves, the gay liberation newspapers and so forth, I could see that just was not true. This narrative that we have of fracture and splintering is not really a true representation of the flourishing of multiple kinds of movements in that era or now. That in fact, what people were doing in particular in the gay liberation movement was trying to understand the relationship or what we might now call, the intersection between sexuality and gender and issues of the Vietnam War, issues of racial injustice, issues of capitalism. They were thinking through those relationships and that really became the heart of what I have pursued in my own research, is thinking about the relationships between different kinds of movements.

I teach courses in the history of sexuality writ large that aren't about activism, that include topics like eugenics or also heterosexuality, right, and the history of birth control and so forth. But my research is really motivated by this desire to think through the intersections of these questions including in how they

play out in activism and that's kind of what shapes all of my teaching. Felicia, I want to move to a different question. One that I know you have a lot to say about, which is how did you see high-stakes testing affect the classroom in your experience or from your perspective, and how might this relate to this broader question of teaching LGBTQIA history. And just for context, high-stakes testing, of course, are those modes of assessment, generally standardized tests that come with pretty significant consequences—either for individual students, for schools or for their teachers.

For individual students, consequences might include moving on to the next grade or graduating altogether. For schools, they might include funding, receiving funding or not receiving funding based on test performance. For individual teachers, they might include merit, measurement of teacher merit, therefore the ability to get a raise or not or even to retain a job or not, so very significant consequences.

FELICIA PEREZ

The significant impact of high-stakes testing in the classroom directly is that it makes it incredibly challenging and therefore maybe not worth the time or the effort to include an LGBTQIA history in your lesson plans and in your given semester classes because it probably won't be on the test. When you have high-stakes testing and school mandates or department mandates that are about improving the test scores, everything that's outside of learning and mastering the content that's on the test becomes so irrelevant that it seems like the answer is not overt but is covert not to cover LGBTQ history in a given subject matter or class, dependent on that strong tie to high-stakes testing in a given year or at a given school within a district.

I am not against testing. I am not against assessment and of all the organizations and groups and other teachers and individuals that I've worked with, we are not against assessments. We are not against teaching and then assessing or testing the mastery of a student's understanding of a particular lesson. What we are against are assessments and tests that are uniquely tied to high-stakes situations. Whether that's financial or whether or not you are able to have less opportunities after you do or don't pass a test as a student. What this looks like is you get less funding from the government if your test scores are low or not showing improvement over time to this high bar that nobody ever reaches, by the way. The tests are cookie-cutter, right?

It's everybody knows these words, has this information, knows this vocabulary. It's one-size-fits-all testing. And so what happens if you're sitting on the school site council which happens every spring, you're determining how the funding is being distributed throughout a school for the next year, what happens is you say, "Well, our test scores are low, therefore we cannot afford the school counselor that we need. We cannot afford the school nurse that we need. We cannot afford the art teacher and the P.E. teacher and so on and so forth, for everything that is not tested," right? "We need more English teachers, we need more teachers; those are being tested.

"We don't need the arts teacher, we don't need the music teacher," and when you don't have the P.E. teachers, those particular schools get ROTC classes as their P.E. because the government pays for ROTC faculty to come on to your campus for free and you don't have to worry about paying for that out of your school budget. The school culture and community completely changes when you are so tied to testing. It changes who's on your campus. Is it ROTC or not. It changes the kinds of classes you are offered, everything is just English and math because there are no electives because we couldn't hire those teachers

because electives aren't being tested. Then, also the school culture changes so that everything is about teaching to the test.

When people are coming in to observe your classroom, it's not about, "Is there sort of an energy in that classroom, are the students excited to be there, are they being critical thinkers, are they learning?" Instead, it's, "Well, are they ready for the test," because everything is about the test. That's what makes it high stakes. For high-achieving population schools, it's just the same. It only goes in a different order and that you have all these electives, all these possibilities but you're only going to choose the electives for the AP classes because if you get enough AP classes, your GPA will be just high enough over 4.0.

Essentially, both the high-achieving campuses and the low-achieving campuses being so intricately and deeply tied to high-stakes testing means that teachers are not teaching what could be, but they're teaching what is and they're teaching what is in a way of facts and figures and the dates and numbers and ways to manipulate testing to be successful instead of actually creating amazing individuals who can go out and change the world and think critically about it and be the sort of change agents that we need to move all of us as an entire population.

It becomes incredibly important, that distinction between teaching what is versus teaching what could be; possibility versus what is stagnant and is always going to be the same no matter what you do, is a fundamental thing that you'll see in different sort of campuses that don't have the need or stress of such high-stakes testing.

EMILY HOBSON

Can you explain that a little bit more in concrete terms for a social studies teacher, what's the difference in a lesson or way, the structure of the curriculum between, what you're describing as teaching what is: facts, figures; and teaching what could be: critical thinking?

FELICIA PEREZ

Each state has different standards but the testing that happens in the springtime that most parents and teacher are familiar with are federal testing. You might have state standards, California includes state standards that include talking about a particular historical moment like the Chicano Moratorium, like individuals like Harvey Milk but that is not a federal standard mandate. The federal ones are a little bit more narrow and cover different matters and so what are you actually being tested on: the standards from the federal government, not necessarily only the state. What that means is that you have multiple different things being told to you as an educator.

"I want you to follow the standards of the state and the federal government, they're slightly different and you're going to only be highly held accountable to the federal one," and so while I might want to teach in the classroom about Harvey Milk, about different sort of ... Jackie Goldberg, different sort of like historical figures in the state or in a particular context, I can't because they won't be tested on it. It seems like irrelevant information to cover so you cover very heavily World War Two, the Holocaust, in a world history setting, for example. You cover very heavily the Cold War. You cover very heavily World War One and the American Revolution

But it really kind of ends after World War Two. There's a huge drop-off of both time, capacity and ability to go beyond that, if testing happens in the springtime, you're hoping to get to the Holocaust before testing. And then testing happens and it's like, "Why are we learning anything? We took the test." The kids understand—students begin to understand—that it's really all about this test and this is really all that sort of like matters at some level. And so as an educator, it takes a lot more to then go past 1945, in a world history setting; in U.S. history, it's quite similar.

Now, if you're teaching an honors class or an AP class, you're going to cover more but you're not going to go deeply so you might have Harvey Milk mentioned as a name. But no one is ever going to know more about his contributions, no one is ever going to know more about other individuals in the LGBTQIA community because we're never going to get there and it's also now June and you don't care anymore and "I'm tired, bye." So it's sort of that particular situation and moment. High-stakes testing definitely influences what educators in the classroom feel that they can and should be covering but given that context, there are always going to be ways to go around that or work with that and still include an LGBTQIA curriculum into your lesson plans, in your day-to-day classroom.

EMILY HOBSON

Just to dig a little bit deeper into the question of what do you get to teach once you're teaching this critical thinking approach, let's just take the example of the Civil War, which you're definitely going to cover, definitely fits within that time frame. Is there anything you do differently if the emphasis on granular detail, facts, figures, the great man version of history, if you get to go beyond that, do you do anything differently or is it only about what time period is covered and can you cover those sort of more recent LGBTQIA activism like Milk.

FELICIA PEREZ

A couple of things on that: first is that you were speaking about this relational or what we now sort of know more as the term "intersectionality" of the history of the LGBTQIA community across various other communities. What that means is that every single historical moment that you're teaching about has essentially a queer history in it. You just have to ask if students are seeing it—if it's there, if it's not there. Some of the very brass tacks—these are the things you can do at the beginning of a school year, you could have questions that are, questions that we'll be asking throughout the entire semester, throughout the entire year.

For example, a question that could be a thematic question for your class could be "Who's included, who's not included and why," for every single topic, for every single lesson, for every single historical event. That you're bringing up who's not here and if students aren't talking about, "Well, I mean, I don't know. I don't think I see that LGBTQIA people are here." You as an educator get to say, "Ah, but what about this person and let me tell you about this person," or you could have it be the ever-popular extra credit question, "Who is included, who is not included, why?" Because not only are things relational but they're also contextual.

That's super important as the two, like basic things that come out of a social studies classroom: what is the relationship that this has to other communities, other historical moments, other geographic areas and what is the historic context of that time that allows us to call it this versus this. That allows us to say, "Oh, so that cisgendered woman, who dressed as a man and joined the Confederate army, what would we call them now?" In the context of the time, what were they called then, right? Again, remembering that the

queer community also exists in all communities so having that question of who's in, who's out and why is that, is one way to sort of thematically have critical thinking as well as bringing in folks who are often left out.

EMILY HOBSON

The example you brought up of the woman who passed in the Confederacy in the Civil War, right?

FELICIA PEREZ

Sure.

EMILY HOBSON

That particular person you're thinking about, I think generally is referred to as a woman who passed, right, rather than a trans person. That, I think, really brings up great examples of how to think through the kinds of questions students might have about a person like that and all of the different kinds of answers that might explain a given person, right, so that rather than seeking to say, "Here's this one person and we know that here's this ..." identify some trans person in history, Rather, say, "Here's a range of these people. There was a phenomenon of people dressing as men who are not otherwise living as men in order to participate in the war as well as in some other context," right? Social context at the time.

And we can think through the variety of reasons they might have done so ... and the kinds of ways that that variety might have produced some space for trans people even though a good number of those, people who are passing were doing so simply in order to fight, simply in order to have a certain level of independence.

FELICIA PEREZ

Or, an espionage, trying to get particular information.

EMILY HOBSON

Yes, exactly, espionage and so forth and aren't necessarily all ... I mean, I think the example of the person who fought for the Confederacy is really useful because it can pull back exactly to context rather than to a kind of heroism, right, because students are likely to not heroize the person who fought for the Confederacy quite as much, right, at least in the context you were teaching in, certainly. That, I think is a really great example of opening up to kind of broader context.

LEILA RUPP

This is Queer America, and I'm your host Leila Rupp. You can learn even more about incorporating LGBTQ history into your classroom in a valuable collection of essays called "Understanding and Teaching US Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History." This podcast is produced in partnership with the University of Wisconsin Press, publishers of this anthology, which I edited with Susan K. Freeman. It is the first book designed for high school and university teachers who want to integrate queer history into the standard curriculum. From now until the end of the year, the University of Wisconsin Press is offering a 30 percent discount for Queer America listeners.

You'll find a link to purchase the book at tolerance.org/podcast. Just use the promotional code QA PODCAST, all caps. Again, here are Felicia Perez and Emily Hobson.

FELICIA PEREZ

There are also a lot of other ways to talk about bringing members and history of the LGBTQIA community into your classroom. Folks that might not be tested but are definitely in the room by literally bringing people in the room—via posters, via fixtures on the wall, quotes and what they're about, that folks can interact with and see on the regular basis. My particular high school that I keep referring to is Los Angeles Senior High, was built by an architect who had never built a school before. He was only an architect of prisons. When the school was built, the first two stories had no windows so the classroom has no windows, not even in the door.

I had to create windows and I literally brought these sort of excluded- throughout-history members into the classroom by putting them on the wall. It was posters, it was quotes, it was postcards. When you're a teacher, you're a teacher for life and you're a teacher everywhere. You're on vacation, you're at a museum, you're at an airport and you see a postcard that has a historic figure and an awesome quote like, "I'm going to get that and put it on the wall." Because that's how I bring in people who are not already brought into my curriculum or into my classroom. But it's not enough just to bring things into the room. If you can and if this feels comfortable for you, add a lesson plan, actually going around and looking at the posters, finding out who's on them, writing down questions.

"I didn't know this. I'd like to know that. Who is this person?" Because again, these are lifelong skills, so that's one particular option. The other option going back again to this sort of demand/request/beg for extra credit. During the testing week or weeks, there is time where students are not testing. They are done with testing at a particular grade level, might not be testing on a given day or have a full day of testing. Teachers can give project assignments, so I created this thing called "History Makers." It was 15 to 20 pages of historical figures that I know they were never going to get in terms of, I wasn't going to have the time to bring in those folks in a deep way or they weren't going to cover in the sort of standardized lesson plans.

While they were testing in the spring, when they were done with their test or they were done with a particular moment, they had to fill out that packet. There were 50, sometimes 75 historical figures—Rigoberta Menchú, Karl Marx, all different kinds of folks and I'm not saying Rigoberta Menchú or Karl Marx is queer. There were a variety of different people in that History Makers packet. They had to know their face. They had to be able to recognize them, know their names, know where they were from, know when they passed away, where they were born and the kind of contribution that they made to history.

EMILY HOBSON

The History Makers project is so great because there is such an interest in biography and that project also included presentations at the end, right?

FELICIA PEREZ

Yes.

EMILY HOBSON

Yes, so then students see everybody's, right, so even if they did a project on a particular person, they then get to hear about everybody's.

FELICIA PEREZ

Yup. They're oftentimes in historical books that teachers then use as their references, as their guides. They won't talk about necessarily naming people as members of the LGBTQIA community, right, if you talk about the civil rights movement and significant contributions that members of the African-American community made to the civil rights moment, we usually focus on, let's talk about King, let's talk about Rosa Parks, let's talk about Malcolm X. Rarely do we get into Stokely Carmichael, rarely do we get into Fannie Lou Hamer. Like you just don't get into all of these different folks nor do you name ...

EMILY HOBSON

Bayard Rustin?

FELICIA PEREZ

Right, who is significant to why we even know and have these references of MLK at a podium and the March on Washington, right? Again, that would be that moment if you're asking the questions throughout the year or the semester, "Who's in and who's out?" and you say as you're talking about the contributions of African Americans to the civil rights movement, "Oh, I don't see any queer members here, like, well, 'Let's go there, let's talk about that.'" It also allows an educator and a teacher to be advocating for the students to really control what is happening in the classroom and for students to ask, "Who's in and who's out and why?"

Really starting to connect with students in a way to say, as lifelong learners, your job is to question, your job is to question who's in and who's out and why, all the time. What I'm advocating for here in my own work as an educator and for other educators is to not think that this is so incredibly overwhelming. Because that's what we get: "I don't know queer history; now I have to learn that on top of everything? I don't feel comfortable saying these words. Now I have to introduce that? I don't think that it's my place to bring that in. I don't think I should have to do that." Or "I just don't know where to even begin." And it's actually a lot simpler. We take for granted how heteronormative we make our classrooms.

We take for granted how white we make our classrooms by just following with what we know and what's right in front of us instead of stretching us to really just ... really advocate that our students ask more questions so that it comes from them, so that it comes from the classroom itself, so that you say, I'm following the people, I'm supposed to serve. I am following the instincts that my students have to question and to want to know more. As educators, our job is to facilitate a discussion of really invoking the power of the question and to really have the support needed to go ahead and find those answers and to discover them on your own.

Emily Hobson: Yeah, and I would even add, beyond Bayard Rustin, right, who is such an important architect of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, we can also bring in more queer folks into the history of the black freedom struggle by thinking a bit more broadly about what is the nature of organizing or what is the nature of activism, right? If we are willing to talk about James Baldwin as a cultural critic and a writer who was constantly in public view, in debates, on television, being a voice of movement perspectives and very widely understood to be gay and not really shy about allowing that perception to flourish.

Didn't necessarily come out in the terms that we might expect now but certainly was very widely

understood and even mocked by some, right, on those terms. Or Lorraine Hansberry, right, as a writer who students often will have been exposed to *Raisin in the Sun* and who was actively involved in the homophile movement, the kind of 1950s, early 1960s era of the gay and lesbian movement as well as in black freedom struggle as well. I think that is another way to approach it, right? It also pushes back to some degree against the kind of heteronormative models of leadership that we have for even narrating the history of civil rights that tends to revolve around those already kind of elected or appointed to leadership of major organizations, serving as clergy, et cetera.

We have to look to other kinds of roles precisely because of the ways homophobia works in constructing what leadership means or what speaking out means. I think that the posters on the wall are a great way to do that because students will ask questions about who's so and so, right? We can also get at some of the nuances that might really make some of the conversation difficult, right?

FELICIA PEREZ

Right, right. Going back to some of the moments that you were just describing, the historical moments, historical people, Emily, we in the K–12 educational setting are regularly told, “You’re doing X, Y, and Z, including high- stakes test preparation in order to get them ready for college. They have to know how to take these tests.” To that end, in your experience, Emily, when students arrive in the college classroom, what do they know or not know about queer LGBTQIA history once they get into your room. What do you wish that they knew and if you could kind of describe what that student looks like at the beginning of your class and what you would like them to maybe have with them if you could have made some changes or influence what K–12 teachers are doing.

EMILY HOBSON

By and large, I would say they arrive knowing very little about the queer past and maybe some particularly LGBTQ-identified students might know a few names, a few individuals, usually activist heroes. They don’t know much more than that and those are great jumping-off points but they don’t paint a kind of broader picture. They certainly don’t speak to a kind of broader understanding of like, structures of sexuality, the idea that ... just the idea that sexuality is historical, right? Students generally do not come into class with an idea that our categories for sexuality, sexual identity, have changed over time.

FELICIA PEREZ

Right.

EMILY HOBSON

The bigger obstacle I would say, for me, is not so much that there is this kind of vast bucket that could be filled of knowledge, but rather just kind of bigger assumption about change over time, about kind of progress. Broadly, students will walk into the classroom assuming that it was harder to be queer in the past than now and sure, that is a reasonable place to start but it tends to go along with this kind of vague notion that stuff gets better over time, right? A kind of, “It gets better” version of history that just inevitably somehow over time, change happens. There is a kind of passivity to that.

A sort of notion that “If we just sit around and wait... people in the ’50s had to sit around and wait and stuff got better in a certain number of ways and now, we just have to sit around and wait and other things will get better.” Rather than a kind of understanding that the situation at any moment, that people are

resisting it and that even resistance helps to construct the situation that they're in.

FELICIA PEREZ

Right.

EMILY HOBSON

That there is a back and forth, there is a kind of up and down. It's not a kind of continuous line of progress trending upward over time. It's a constant tension back and forth. There's contingency. There are new norms and laws that come in precisely because there are kinds of struggle, right? Like that the term "homosexual" didn't always exist in the language—in any language—but certainly not in English or in French or in German. Also that there have been other terms especially for gendered identities that have been in many ways obscured by histories of colonialism, right, so that in some instances things have gotten worse, right, for certain kinds of reasons.

That those times that things have gotten worse have been intersecting with problems of institutionalization of racism, colonialism. Also, that there have been movements of political reaction, right, anxiety that comes up so the same kinds of anxieties that produce let's say, Prohibition, went along with kinds of anxieties about women's movement into the public sphere and sexual freedom and so forth, right, including same-sex sexual freedom. That, to me, is the biggest kind of obstacle and I think some of the ways that we can push back just to think about the kinds of things I think high school teachers can do to help prepare students better for college.

I think it is precisely pushing back against the kind of granular knowledge that is, tends to be encouraged by most textbooks and by most kinds of high-stakes testing and more broadly to this idea of critical thinking that you're thinking about and that one of the ... like I'm not that ... I don't care that much whether students come into my classroom being able to recall a date or an individual that they were taught in the 11th grade.

FELICIA PEREZ

Wait, I'm sorry, Emily. Could you say that again, because I want to make sure that K-12 teachers hear this from a higher-ed professor and that administrators who might also be listening, hear this as well.

EMILY HOBSON

Absolutely. I don't really care if they know a specific date, that an event happened or even necessarily that the event happened or that some individual's name. I do want them to have some broad sense of major eras so that they're kind of intelligently making guesses. For example, if they're presented with a primary source document that they don't have clues about, I'd like them to be able to interpret that in generally intelligent kinds of ways and then we can build from there. But I'm not concerned with them knowing and having recall of the kinds of facts that they can look up on Wikipedia, right?

FELICIA PEREZ

What is important?

EMILY HOBSON

What is important is their ability to ask questions about why something is going on or why something ... why things got better, why things got worse for a particular kind of community, what even “getting better or worse” meant. To be able to ask questions about why there might have been a relationship between urbanization and queer community, right? Why urbanization might have helped to encourage breaking of sexual norms, right? Those kinds of things are the kinds of things I want them to be able to come in thinking about starting to kind of muddle through, coming up with hypotheses. I frequently am asking students in my classroom to come up with ideas, answers about why something might have happened. And sometimes they look a little deer in the headlights, right?

FELICIA PEREZ

Right.

EMILY HOBSON

That they're like, “What do you mean, I'm supposed to make a guess? Like, I don't know.” And I'll ask them to make guesses and they're terrified because they're so used to having to either know or not know, and they shouldn't say anything if they don't know. Because, you know...

FELICIA PEREZ

Right.

EMILY HOBSON

That's just wrong. No, I actually just want them a conversation and start the process of thinking, right? We practice it, we practice it. They get more comfortable over the course of the semester. Generally, they get more comfortable over the course of college because college classrooms in general are interested in this kind of thinking. But I would like them to come in more comfortable, right, so that we could start there.

FELICIA PEREZ

I think what's important here is this idea that, that is how you bring in LGBTQIA history in any classroom across any subject matter is to actually lean into questions, not answers; to lean into questioning and guessing and the fluidity of learning something; that mastery is about learning over time and to not stop wanting to seek out the answers and to seek out more questions to ask. I think what would be really great right now is for you to go over some specific things that would be great to maybe bring in and then I can talk about some specific ways to ... whether it's in an elementary school classroom or a secondary classroom, just to like really start to bring in that inclusivity beyond some of the examples that we've mentioned.

EMILY HOBSON

Okay, for example, students in let's say, I think 11th grade ... 10th or 11th grade but especially 11th U.S. History, right, might be likely to get some exposure to the idea of the eugenics movement and the problems in eugenics of racialized sciences, conceptions of race as this fundamental difference, ranking of intelligence, population controls, et cetera. Eugenics is very much related also to the history of sexology, which has a really interesting place in queer history broadly both oppressive and liberatory in certain ways, oppressive in that, it often has gone along with the kind of ranking of people defined as homosexuals or as transgender as flawed or as wrong.

But also liberatory in a sense of just merely creating those categories themselves, giving people a way of self-naming, or giving them a name whose meanings that begin to transform. Also really important in that sexology also has a relationship to the history of transgender medicine, even if a tortured history. Being able to think about both the oppressive and the liberatory side of this kind of scientific categorization. The oppressive side including the eugenicist approach. And my experience with young people, high school students and the colleges, that they're really fascinated with the question of categories and labels and what they mean, right?

They're constantly dealing with how they label themselves, how they label others and what that might mean and many are embracing labels as very exciting, right? "I'm a goth." it's exciting to call yourself something that's distinct and yet, also labels can be very cruel and very limiting. I think high school students can engage really well with that kind of question, like, "What's the relationship between science and rights?" Right? That we can think through in relationship to sexuality and race and also allows us to think through the relationship between those two structures.

Another example would be the Harlem Renaissance. I brought up the question of urbanization, and the Harlem Renaissance is really widely understood as an important site for queer history because it's this moment of the flourishing of urban culture, also of a kind of urban subculture, leisure popular culture. It's partly related to a racist view of black people as immoral but it also is related to black people, sort of self-fashioning of spaces, of freedom, cultural spaces, music and so forth. The Harlem Renaissance is really useful as one of the origins of a lot of models of LGBTQIA life. It's also an exciting thing to talk about because queer history or queer existence is often so represented as white, that is really great to be able to open up for students an example of where it's not so white.

Another example might be World War Two. There is a wealth of really wonderful resources out there to talk about how gay and lesbian people started to organize in the midst of the armed forces in World War Two but also we have lots of evidence of course of military and other government crackdown against gay and lesbian organizing and culture inside the military immediately after it. Then, finally of course, just thinking about 1960s social movements, being sure to include gay and lesbian liberation as part of that, I think often to the extent that youth culture of the 1950s is kind of brought into the classroom, it's extremely heteronormative, right?

It also includes the seedbed of a lot of other kinds of sexual freedom and allows students also to think through the relationships between gay and lesbian liberation and other kinds of social movements. One of the interesting things about a lot of these examples is that they all have a certain amount of nuance. They all have a kind of push and pull between possibility and closing down of possibility. So World War Two, sort of, things get opened up but they're also getting shut down soon after.

And of course, in world history, right, we can also think about that through...right before the Holocaust. The flourishing of queer life in Germany before the Nazis come into power and then students are interested to think through the question of, why does sexuality matter? Why are people that anxious about sexuality that it becomes one of the elements—certainly not the driving element, but certainly one very important element—of the Nazi regime?

FELICIA PEREZ

That was reminding me that early on, if you are an educator who's covering early colonialism and you're talking about Columbus and you start to talk about the Taíno community, you have this whole moment that's ... that's also very queer but I don't think that people traditionally think of it that way, when we're talking any time about like family structures or why it matters to build political power with increased population, right? If building political power is with a particular kind of population being repopulated or growing, eugenics movement speaks to this, the Holocaust speaks to this and early colonialism speaks to this in terms of, "We only want certain people to procreate.

"We only want certain people to continue to exist and increase in population and others ..." So procreation becomes, like, very important in particular ways, which is the thing that teachers are like, "Do I have to talk about sex?" and it's like, "No, but you do have to talk about populations and you do have to talk about communities and how they build and don't," and people can figure out how populations increase or decrease on their own and when it comes to ... when I'm bringing up this idea of Columbus and Taínos, it's not like the Taínos were queer but it's that their family structure, we might say, was a queer family structure in that there were no marriages. Men didn't marry women. Women didn't necessarily live with their husbands; they had multiple partners.

They lived in full communities—all everyone together. Not any one person was in a monogamous relationship and when you get these kinds of details, they're brought in, in a historical context to talk about then what gets taken away because it's not under a Christian orthodoxy. The idea of what your family structure was at one point and how it changes and why, again, coming back to this idea of what's the relation and what's the context? Is it oppressive? Is it liberatory? Who's in and who's out? In August of this year, a nine-year-old boy committed suicide.

It was a particular moment where a lot of articles came up about how to include things in the classroom to really help and there's some great articles that I'm going to reference here: Teen Vogue came out with a wonderful article on August 27th by Danielle Corcione and it's titled, "How To Use Gender-Neutral Words" and the idea of taking out gender from your classroom is not actually about taking something out, it's actually about bringing something in which is this inclusivity of everyone regardless of how they want to identify. Instead of saying, "boys and girls," "ladies and gentlemen." Instead, it's "folks," "friends," "everyone," "people."

It's "humankind" instead of "mankind." It's "people" instead of "man" or "men." It's "members of Congress" instead of "congressmen," "council person," "first-year student" instead of "freshman." "Machine-made, synthetic, artificial" instead of "man-made." "Parent," instead of "mother or father." "Child" instead of "son or daughter." Then, there's another great article from LGBTQ Nation. It's written by Sarah Toce and the title is "Tips for Making the Modern Classroom Inclusive for LGBTQ Kids This Fall." This particular one, this one came out on August 25th. In this particular article, there are instructions about making the lesson plan inclusive, talking about how to be an ally, bringing in allies, talking about people as allies.

Making everything gender neutral from not having the boys line and the girls line, to the boys' cubby or the girls' cubby, to lining things up maybe by birthday, birth month, color coding, alphabetical by name. Stop all together using gender with some of the things that I was mentioning in the earlier article.

Embracing teachable moments. In other words, if a student says, “That’s gay” or “You’re acting like a girl,” to really stop that in that moment and to use it to talk about what that really means and what are the needs of the classroom. To announce from the get-go that this classroom, this physical space, is a safe space. We’re not going to make it unsafe for anybody in the classroom and that folks in the classroom get to say when it feels unsafe and that as a community, you with how to bring up issues that might feel uncomfortable.

We’re super excited to have had this time to share our experiences in this conversation with educators out there that are either in a K–12 setting or a higher ed setting because everything that we mentioned about being gender neutral, being inclusive, having these questions is not the norm but we need to normalize this because what we have normalized is that there are always going to be folks excluded.

That you have to make sure and fight, that you see yourself and that there’s still opportunities for folks to feel like they can do something. We wanted to really have a conversation today, where you heard at least one thing that resonated and heard another thing that you feel you could adapt or apply immediately in your teaching for the sake of your students. I learned a few years into teaching that teaching is learning twice. For us as educators, being able to teach some of this methodology or some of this information is us learning it twice, and so we also want to create opportunities where our students get to be teachers of information, whether it’s to their siblings or their peers or their family members or to another student, is also an additional important way to also learn something and to really start to cement it.

We talked a lot about what brought us into educating and a lot of it had to deal with our parents and the kinds of classroom experiences and school experiences that we had, and I think that that is a testament to what we’re asking people to do both at home and in the classroom: to create a learning environment where you can be anything you want to be with or without the stories of the struggles of how hard it was to get to the possibility of the now.

Emily Hobson: Bringing queer history into all kinds of teaching and especially K-12 teaching, it’s not a question of covering everything, right? It’s not a question of exhaustive content. Queer history is a content but it is also a kind of approach to figuring out how to raise questions, how to crack open the historical narrative so that things that were not immediately apparent but were going on under the surface can be uncovered or at least considered, as well as things that were going on then, that then later became suppressed can be kind of recovered. It is a way to alter the shape of your classroom a little bit so that more people can come in.

It is also a way to really energize one’s teaching, I would hope. That it really is as much an approach and in being an approach, I hope that kind of frees us to not be too freaked out by the kind of fear that “Oh my God, I’m not going to cover everything and what if I make a mistake and I leave this one person out or this one event out or I get a particular name wrong?” It’s not so much about that. It’s more about broadly, what are people left with.

FELICIA PEREZ

Thanks, Emily.

EMILY HOBSON

Thanks, Felicia.

LEILA RUPP

Emily Hobson is an assistant professor of history and gender, race and identity at the University of Nevada, Reno, and the author of *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left*. Felicia Perez is the creator and author of the social studies curriculum series, “History’s Mysteries: Solve the Crime of the Time.” She serves in the leadership of the Center for Story-based Strategy, a national organization that harnesses the power of narrative for social change. *Queer America* is a podcast from Teaching Tolerance, in partnership with the University of Wisconsin Press.

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Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, providing free resources to educators who work with children from kindergarten through high school. You can also find those online at tolerance.org. Thanks to Felicia Perez and Emily Hobson for sharing their insights with us. This podcast was produced by Shea Shackelford with production assistance from Russell Gragg. Kate Shuster is our project manager. Music in this episode is by Chris Zabriskie.

So, what do you think? Come tell us on Facebook and Twitter, review us on iTunes, and let your friends and colleagues know about the podcast. I’m Dr. Leila J. Rupp, professor of feminist studies at the University of California Santa Barbara, and your host for *Queer America*.