

**Teachers With Pride:**

***Mapping out the Path to Inclusive Classrooms***

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## INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of inclusivity, the word 'welcoming' may come to mind. Many people look at inclusivity as acceptance, but in an educational setting, inclusivity must reach far past mere acceptance. Inclusivity in a classroom is reflected through all identities being welcomed and celebrated, but it is also about creating an environment that allows the open flow of discussion, regardless of identity. With the countless aspects that make up an identity, all must be welcomed, as long as they do not pose a threat to another person's safety. In general, an inclusive classroom should feel safe and supportive, and it should mimic the goal of equity; every student deserves and should be provided with the resources that they need to be successful, both academically and socially.

Throughout history, exclusive behavior targeted at specific communities has been displayed in many ways, and in regards to the LGBTQ+ community, bullying and harassment have been common forms that have targeted queer individuals. People's biases, either implicit or explicit, are often carried over into their treatment of the individuals who they come across, and this is frequently mirrored in education. Many queer people have faced verbal or physical harassment, and it is not uncommon to hear about a person's life being in danger due to the societal rejection of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Meyer). In schools where an exclusive environment is developed and fostered, many consequences impact the queer individuals who are being excluded, such as poor mental health and academic disengagement (Rechter). Despite the massive amounts of progress that the LGBTQ+ community has made over the past few decades, to this day, many LGBTQ+ students still face hostile school environments.

More than half of LGBTQ+ students in middle and high school face dangerous or unsafe school environments, with 30% missing at least one day due to uncomfortable conditions (Cusatis, p.1). Due to the frequency of queer students being absent because of a hostile school

environment that makes them feel unwelcome or unsafe, many queer students are missing out on important content in class, stunting their academic success. According to the 2019 National School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN, 60.8% of LGBTQ+ students who did not plan to or were unsure about whether they would graduate said that hostile school climate was one of the causes for their uncertainty about or lack of desire to graduate (Koswic et al., 2020, p.46). Not only did GLSEN find that exclusive educational environments stunted and possibly cut off queer students' academic success, but they also had detrimental effects on students' mental health as well; students who reported experiencing discrimination had lower self-esteem levels and higher depression levels (Koswic et al., 2020, p.52).

The reality that many LGBTQ+ students have to face daily is not only a travesty for them, but for all students in general. With the rising numbers of openly LGBTQ+ students in America and the increase in awareness amongst society, the typical exclusive and heteronormative curriculum not only jeopardizes the learning environment and academic outcomes of LGBTQ+ students, but it is also harmful to non-LGBTQ+ students as it prevents social awareness and promotes exclusive behavior. This promotion of exclusion robs these students of experiences that allow them to learn how to function in the diverse society that we currently see in the 21st century. Therefore, an inclusive curriculum, primarily in secondary school, is beneficial for all students regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Overall, an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum contributes to a safe and supportive educational setting for everyone to thrive in, and more teachers must start being the spark that lights the flame of inclusive education (Cusatis, p.1).

With this in mind, this guidebook was created for secondary English teachers to use and reference to create more LGBTQ+ inclusive classrooms. This guidebook is divided into four sections. The first section is about how a teacher should build the foundation of their curriculum and their classroom. The curriculum subsection focuses on how one should use their curriculum as a tool for both reflection and exposure and how one should ensure that their efforts to be

inclusive are not only consistent but also extensive throughout the year. The classroom subsection focuses on how a teacher should develop their classroom into an open space for discussion, and it also discusses the classroom dynamic that a teacher should foster. The second section of the guidebook is focused primarily on the creation of quality assignments. It discusses the importance of literature selection and provides two examples that can be assigned. It additionally includes a brief literary analysis and an assignment that can be paired with the book itself. This section also talks about the influence of Common Core standards and how a teacher should create inclusive assignments based around said standards. The third section of the guidebook is about intersectionality in the classroom and how a teacher should reflect intersectionality in not only their curriculum but also in their interactions with the school community in general. The fourth and final section of this guidebook discusses the many forms of pushback that a teacher may face when creating and implementing an inclusive curriculum and the many ways that they can persist through challenges.

## **SECTION ONE: THE FOUNDATION**

An LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum contributes to a safe and supportive educational setting. It promotes a sense of community and engagement, leading to more involvement on all levels. Students that are a part of the LGBTQ+ community will feel safer expressing themselves due to the supportive educational setting they are in. With a supportive environment, peer-to-peer interactions will more than likely improve. This may also begin to influence the teacher themselves, as a happy class leads to a happy teacher.

To begin creating this positive learning environment, we must rely on teachers. As key advocates for LGBTQ+ youth, “educators have the power to create this safe and welcoming learning environment...” (Cusatis, p.1). It is important that students feel welcomed and accepted by their teacher, and they should feel that intention reflected in both the curriculum that they are learning and the classroom in which they are learning in (Schwartz Interview, 2021). Both

curriculum and classroom environment are ways in which a student interacts with their education, and when both represent and reflect inclusive efforts and values, an environment of open discussion and community can be fostered.

## **CURRICULUM**

In terms of curriculum, a good place to start is by making efforts to have one's curriculum be a tool for both exposure & reflection (GLSEN (2019) p.1). By reflecting different lived experiences in the work that is assigned, a teacher's curriculum allows some students to resonate with the class and other students to be exposed to different backgrounds and experiences. A study conducted by GLSEN found that having an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum is directly correlated to a less hostile school experience for LGBTQ+ students. They also found that overall, there is a positive impact for *everyone* when a teacher's curriculum is inclusive. LGBTQ+ students felt that they received more acceptance from their teachers and peers, and this led to a greater feeling of connectedness and community in their schools (GLSEN (2011), p.2). Overall, it is important for a student to learn from and connect with the curriculum that they are being taught; however, it should be noted that when making an inclusive curriculum, a teacher's efforts have to extend past the time that is specifically dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community, such as Pride Month (GLSEN, p.2).

Only being inclusive during times such as Pride Month can further exclude the LGBTQ+ community; if the LGBTQ+ community is only given attention during one time a year, it sends the message that the community is in the other category. This is a form of alienation that can further a student's feeling of isolation in school. When a teacher only focuses on LGBTQ+ topics during times such as Pride Month, rather than their curriculum portraying their goals, it becomes a failed attempt at inclusivity. It may be successful in exposing some students to different lived experiences, but it does not allow queer students to truly resonate with the curriculum. In this scenario, rather than being genuinely inclusive, the teacher has side-barred LGBTQ+ topics,

creating a fraction in the curriculum that represents the norm and the other. It is important to communicate with LGBTQ+ students that they are a part of the whole and that their presence and history is not a small fraction of the group, but rather an essential feature. A teacher can accomplish this by doing things such as making LGBTQ+ protagonists and themes a central part of their curriculum or regularly mentioning LGBTQ+ topics in class.

Much like curriculum, the classroom environment is also vital to inclusivity. If a teacher does not promote a healthy and inclusive classroom dynamic, then their inclusive curricular efforts may be undermined by an exclusive classroom culture.

## **THE CLASSROOM**

A classroom should reflect a teacher's goals, and if the goal is inclusivity then the classroom should act as an open space for discussion and exposure. In order to do so, one should use the physical and social nature of their classroom to their advantage so that they can make every aspect of it as inclusive as possible (Colter Interview, 2021). For the physical nature of a classroom, items such as posters, pictures, stickers, and classroom decorations can be utilized to send a strong message of inclusivity. The physical setting that people are surrounded by often has a subconscious impact on them (Kreitzer). By seeing physical forms of media that promote inclusivity and acceptance on a consistent basis, inclusive ideals will begin to be normalized in the classroom.

One can also branch off from the standard idea of what their physical classroom is by adopting the idea that the teacher themselves is a part of the classroom. Through doing so, the teacher allows inclusivity to take on a more social form. As Nora Colter, a teacher from Denver puts it, she "makes herself the curriculum" (Colter Interview). This is done when teachers are mindful of the way they present themselves. Alterations to one's wardrobe that break gender norms is a great place to start. For example, if a teacher identifies as male, then painting their nails can be something they do that requires minimal effort on their part, but it can have a

drastic impact on the overall attitude that is cultivated in their classroom. Seeing a male presenting teacher with painted nails opens the opportunity for questions to be asked and discussions to be had, giving a teacher the chance to expose their students to new beliefs and communicate that their classroom is a safe space. The open expression of one's identity also goes hand-in-hand with this. Being open about one's inclusion in or acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community will send a clear message to one's students. This dynamic will then be reflected in the social aspects of their classroom.

It should be noted, however, that for inclusivity to remain, there needs to be a constant effort. Work has to be done for the social environment of the classroom to also aid in a teacher's inclusive efforts. For starters, instead of testing rote memorization of texts, teachers should encourage students to reflect on and challenge ideas presented in the literature or class. When new literature is assigned, questions that require deeper thinking and have no singular correct answer can be used to make sure that students are actually comprehending the literature they are consuming. Prompting questions that explicitly probe and promote discussions that scratch past textbook questions also allow for students to have a voice. In general, focusing on students talking and having a voice in the classroom is important and is the whole point of a teacher's inclusive efforts (Colter Interview). To do this, a teacher can teach lessons that take an extra step past the book being read to introduce new ideas that are relevant to students' ability to analyze the literature but also may allow students to reflect on their connections to the book as well. For example, a lesson about identity and the different things that make up an identity can expose students to an array of new information, and an open discussion about said topics allows for students to collaborate with one another and see differing perspectives. This directly promotes inclusive behaviors and attitudes amongst students.

All of this should be done keeping in mind that the classroom and school environment are important to the efforts a teacher makes. As hostile school climates persist, with 65% of LGBTQ+ students hearing homophobic remarks from their peers and 33% hearing transphobic

remarks, the educational outcomes, safety, and mental health for these students is negatively impacted (Cusatis). Peer behavior has a massive role in a person's experience and attitude towards school. It is important that a teacher who is making inclusive efforts not only corrects exclusive language and behavior but also prevents it from occurring in the first place. By publicly communicating the consequences for such behavior before it happens, a teacher will inform their LGBTQ+ students that they have an ally and a safe space, and they will also start laying the foundation of their inclusive classroom.

Efforts that stretch past prevention also play a major role in the classroom. Small things such as asking for pronouns and preferred names at the beginning of the school year is a way to subtly begin communicating with a class the type of teacher they have and the type of beliefs their teacher holds. A teacher also has to be aware of the language that they use. Teachers should avoid making assumptions about a person's sexuality or gender identity, and should rather use gender-neutral language when they are unsure. For example, rather than just outright assuming that a person likes boys or girls, they can ask before engaging in a conversation involving that topic. If they are uncomfortable with asking, then they can use words such as "partner" or "significant other" to avoid making assumptions. The lack of assumptions will begin to normalize other identities while preventing cisgender identities from being viewed as the classroom's default. Gender-neutral language can also be incorporated in the examples that are used in class (Gravely Interview, 2021). Language often influences an environment, and if a teacher wants to make conscious efforts to be more inclusive, then using the examples they give in class as a method to promote and normalize LGBTQ+ identities is another way to go.

Unquestionably, any change to be made will be gradual. It is entirely too unrealistic for a teacher to be expected to be perfect at being inclusive at all times. In her book, *Coaching for Equity: Conversations That Change Practice*, Elena Aguilar says, "Discomfort won't kill you and every time you go through an uncomfortable phase you will be more prepared and resilient the next time discomfort shows up. It's not your fault that things are the way they are, but it is your



responsibility to do something about them” (Aguilar). It is important that teachers recognize that they do not have to do everything or make all of their desired changes at once. Inclusivity is a working effort and mistakes will be made. Whatever step you are taking to be inclusive is a step in the right direction (Colter Interview). As long as teachers go back, reflect on their mistakes, revise and edit their methods, and keep pushing forward, the work will pay off. Trying pilot lessons and seeing how they mesh with a class is a great way to test things out while helping others’ inclusive efforts as well (Chiappano Interview, 2021). Overall, the focus should be on not giving up and always making an effort to learn more and do better next time.

On the journey toward inclusion, another important thing is the assignments that are given to students. In a class, the work that a student does is the direct connection between them and their teacher. Diversifying assignments is a wonderful opportunity to introduce students to new ideas and beliefs, and it is how students can feel a teacher’s inclusive efforts being reflected.

## **SECTION TWO: LITERATURE**

Due to the nature of an English classroom, English teachers have an advantage with the learning experiences that they can design. English class naturally promotes discourse and discussion. With new ideas being at the center of discourse and discussion, English teachers have wiggle room to introduce these new ideas. If the importance of an idea is questioned, an English teacher has the ability to justify it based on various standards. A 9th-10th grade Common Core standard requires students to “respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented” (National Governors Association, 2010). It is important that teachers recognize this advantage and use it to aid their inclusive efforts. This is because literature is one of the many methods that people can connect with bigger ideas.

Through literature, students are open to not only seeing representations of themselves but also of other people. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, a professor emeritus at Ohio State University, explains that,

"Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books" (Bishop).

With the influence that literature can have over a student and its ability to be a tool, it is crucial that students feel reflected in the curriculum that they are required to study (Schwartz Interview). When picking out literature, teachers should ensure that they are taking into consideration the demographics of their class. Proper student reflection and relation to assigned texts will only occur if the teacher makes the effort to find relatable books. This is not to say that every book has to have a character or lived experience that every student can relate to. In fact, it is important that different lifestyles are represented so that students *are* introduced to new ideas. On top of relatability, the theme and quality of assigned books also matter as they both directly correlate to a student's engagement. If students are not interested in a book they will most likely not read it; therefore, picking literature that feels relevant plays a big part in student engagement (DeBor Interview, 2021).

## **SUGGESTED READINGS AND ACTIVITIES**

*Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda*

There are a myriad of diverse authors and literature options that English educators can bring to the classroom to spark discussions on identity, including LGBTQ+ identities. One suggestion would be *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli. It is at an HL640L reading level, which makes it approachable for students who may struggle with reading comprehension while maintaining a 9-12th grade interest level. In this book, Albertalli explores many themes centered around the social dynamics of high school. The story focuses on a sixteen-year-old named Simon, who is closeted. After a peer of his finds an email that reveals his sexuality, Simon begins to be blackmailed. With the threat of his and his online friend's sexual identity being exposed, Simon finds himself going through a multitude of experiences involving new and confounding ideas around friendship, love, and identity. This book explores many themes that are relatable to high school students, and it gives a voice to those in various minority communities. The great thing about this book is that it also has a movie adaptation titled, *Love, Simon*.

Due to this, many assignments involving the two, such as a Compare, Contrast, and Critique (C.C.C.), can be used or created. The Compare, Contrast, and Critique is an assignment that requires students to have both read the book and watched the movie adaptation of it. After doing so, they will compare and contrast the two, and then write an essay about how the similarities or differences shape Simon's story and the importance that the similarities and differences have (See Appendix A). This assignment promotes critical thinking as well as the use of strong evidence. With this book and assignment, students are introduced to new perspectives about identity that are relayed in a familiar manner due to the protagonist being a high school student.

### *The Meaning of Birds*

Another book suggestion would be *The Meaning of Birds* by Jaye Robin Brown. Weaving together the past and the present, *The Meaning of Birds* is a story that focuses on love and

grief; it uses the story of a high school senior named Jess as a medium to explore the journey of a teenager's first love and first loss. In this story, Jess, a young girl who identifies as a lesbian, falls in love with her deskmate, Vivi. Jess is a "troubled" teen who struggles with her anger issues while Vivi is a breath of fresh air that pushes her to face her pain and use her talent as an artist to transform it into something positive. As their relationship progresses, Jess' future feels bright and warm but her perfect world crumbles after Vivi suddenly passes away. Faced with the gut-wrenching reality of her life, Jess begins to push away her friends and family, fully giving up on pursuing a future, because for Jess a future without Vivi is no future at all. As she suffers through her grief, Jess begins to use a work-study program she's enrolled in as a means to cope. Unexpectedly, a new interest for blacksmithing is sparked and along the way she gains two mentors. Jess continues to channel her emotions into her newfound passion, and while she continues to navigate her grief, a new life without Vivi begins to form itself. *The Meaning of Birds* beautifully navigates the many themes of grief, first love, and friendship. It gives representation to many identities and many lived experiences while wrapping it all around a powerful and thought provoking story.

With the many themes addressed throughout the story, a discussion centered around student voice is an amazing assignment that can be used or created. A Teacher Discussion Guide (T.D.G.) helps direct a meaningful discussion centered around the book. In order to use the T.D.G., a teacher must first assign *The Meaning of Birds* to a group of students. While reading, it is preferable for the students to take notes that are centered around themes or ideas that they would like to mention or talk about during the class discussion. After they have finished reading, a class period dedicated to discussion should be held (See Appendix B). Using the T.D.G.'s set of questions as a means to direct the discussion will promote collaboration and healthy discussion of new perspectives.

Both of these stories are amazing reads for high school students and when paired with assignments such as the C.C.C. or the T.D.G., they hold great potential for elevating an

inclusive curriculum. Creating or using assignments such as these two, however, may be seen as a challenge for some teachers who have to follow Common Core standards.

## **COMMON CORE**

In America, Common Core standards are a big dictator regarding the assignments and literature that English teachers can assign. With many public schools across the nation using Common Core as their set of standards that they build their curriculum around, it is imperative that more teachers begin to customize their curriculum so that it is inclusive while meeting Common Core standards.

A customized curriculum can allow a teacher to express themselves and teach in a manner that they are comfortable with. With this in mind, it is a teacher's responsibility to research their state standards before creating their classroom's curriculum as they will greatly impact their flexibility (Chiappano Interview). If a teacher does not know their state's standards they may make mistakes, and their efforts can be cut short due to them not meeting their state's requirements.

In general, however, the Common Core literature and writing standards for grades 6-12 allow teachers a large amount of flexibility in the content they teach, as long as they address certain skills through that content. For example, one Common Core writing standard for grades 9-10 says that students must, "Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content" (National Governors Association, 2010). This standard leaves a lot of room for creativity, and with the proper usage of the many resources, such as Learning for Justice, that are available, a teacher can still be inclusive while following these standards. In an interview conducted with Ashley Chiappano, an LGBTQ+ advocate and the Safe Schools & Community Education Manager for Garden State Equality, New Jersey's biggest LGBTQ+ organization, she gave an example of an inclusive lesson that meets state standards. She referred to this lesson

as the “Pink Triangle Lesson”. The pink triangle lesson is about how gay men were forced to wear an upside-down pink triangle, placed in concentration camps, and then later killed during the Holocaust (Chiappano Interview). Chiappano noted that despite this lesson centering on an LGBTQ+ experience, it also meets the Holocaust and genocide standards for New Jersey. English teachers have even more flexibility, as most standards for English classrooms are skills based. This allows for English teachers to use a wide variety of content that not only covers those skills, but also introduces new ideas and experiences to their students.

When teachers are trying to create lessons or test out pilot lessons, they can use a similar approach as Chiappano mentioned to ensure that they are being inclusive while still meeting state and Common Core standards. While on the journey to being inclusive, teachers will have to use their skills and dedication to find the wiggle room they have and use it to their advantage. When done correctly, the opportunities and possibilities are limitless.

### **SECTION THREE: INTERSECTIONALITY IN THE CLASSROOM**

Naturally, there are only so many boxes a teacher can check off with the aspects of identity that they themselves bring to the table. Due to this, oftentimes teachers may forget to give other aspects of identity that they cannot relate to as much attention as they need. As of 2018, about 79% of public school teachers are White, 9% are Hispanic, 7% are Black, 2% are Asian, 2% are of two or more races, and 1% are American Indian/Alaska Native (The Condition of Education, 2020). While this absence of teachers with diverse backgrounds or experiences is often acknowledged in American schools, rather than diversifying classroom experiences, extracurriculars are often used to fill in for those shortcomings. One issue with this is that only 36% of students of color have access to GSA clubs (Cusatis). This leaves an obvious gap between queer students of color and their white counterparts in terms of resources and safe spaces. With a lack of representation and support in both extracurriculars and curriculum, a void in the advocacy that students of color receive is then created.

On top of the void in advocacy that they receive in school, LGBTQ+ youth of color also face another set of challenges while attending school. Although LGBTQ+ youth already face disproportionate rates of, “school drop out, school discipline and justice system involvement,” queer students of color seem to be at a higher risk (GLSEN 2016, p.25). For the sake of the safety of LGBTQ+ youth of color, their positive development, and the outcomes of their education, it is important for a curriculum to reflect a multitude of experiences. A number of students do not fall into just one box, and the intersectionality of their identities is often neglected. Intersectionality in the classroom needs to be addressed for this very reason. Increasing the representation of diverse identities in the classroom and consistently shining the spotlight on history that is relevant to these identities is a necessary step for inclusivity. The responsibility of doing so naturally falls onto the shoulders of teachers. Being in a teacher role puts one in a very special and sensitive position in people’s lives, and the ways in which teachers use their position can greatly affect the future of a handful of people. Being responsible while taking on serious matters such as intersectionality in the classroom may be challenging at first, but it is necessary.

Many teachers may find it difficult to properly address intersectionality in their classrooms because they have to follow a provided curriculum plan. Luckily, the literature that a teacher assigns can *always* be representative and with a little bit of contrivance literature can be a highly valuable tool for intersectionality. Using literature as a primary method to initially address intersectionality can help open up the doors for the discussion of identities. To correctly go about doing so, a teacher first has to recognize that they will need to make the effort to not just rely solely on the curriculum they are provided with, as it oftentimes only addresses a straight, white, Christian perspective (Colter Interview). Teachers have to build a broader and more realistic version of the identities that they are addressing, and if they have to be a bit stealthy about how they do so, such as using student choice to their advantage to include intersectional and inclusive options, then stealthy they must be (Colter; Kane).

In general, the big idea for inclusivity means that a curriculum should reflect a multitude of experiences. LGBTQ+ advocacy is integral to many individuals' inclusive journey, but inclusivity has many intricate layers to it. In order to give these intersectional identities the proper attention they deserve, teachers can use student choice to their advantage. By allowing the students to choose from a range of literary choices that include intersectional protagonists or themes, students' freedom of choice remains, but the exposure to intersectionality is involved. For this method to have the best results, like everything else, research plays a big part. Properly conducting research and building a list of books that have more diverse perspectives is the first and biggest step to utilizing this method; however, this approach is not the only way teachers can go about raising awareness. Intersectionality does not only have to be acknowledged through literature, and due to the position that teachers are naturally in, their professional platform also allows for them to be able to use their voices in more extensive ways.

Due to their position, teachers have a certain amount of privilege and influence. Utilizing this authority to be a strong advocate for students is the biggest part of being an ally. Empowering students through the classroom and curriculum is important, but teachers have a responsibility to use their power to take bigger steps towards inclusivity. Raising awareness among the school's faculty, during school board meetings, and helping facilitate or support local events are a few examples of how a teacher can use their position and authority to serve their inclusive goals. On a macro level, teachers should be aware of and speaking out for more inclusive school policies; they have the knowledge and power to be a tool that magnifies student voices. It is not the job of the oppressed to be the main fighter against oppression, and it is important that teachers recognize this and use their privilege to aid in the fight. All of this will come with opposition that is sincerely challenging, but this work is important and it needs to be done.

#### **SECTION FOUR:**



## **CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING AN INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM**

In the pursuit of change, there is always the presence of a challenge and ensuring inclusivity in the classroom is no different. When creating an inclusive classroom, there are usually two major challenges that occur: a lack of understanding of content or best practices on the teacher's end and pushback, either from students or families. These two challenges can be a bit troublesome, as they both can directly impact the quality and outcome of an inclusive curriculum. Due to this, it is essential to the success of an inclusive curriculum that teachers know how to deal with these challenges appropriately.

If there is a lack of education and awareness of LGBTQ+ experiences or challenges on the teacher's end, a barrier can be built up between the teacher, their curriculum, and their students. To prevent this from happening, professional development is a vital part of implementing inclusivity in the classroom (Colter; Schwartz; Chiappano). Professional development could be initiated by and made for all members of school communities, from families to school boards. Fortunately, there are a plethora of resources and opportunities available for teachers to take advantage of. Setting up training days with local LGBTQ+ organizations is a common method used by many teachers. Individual teachers can also access free and convenient resources such as handbooks or online pilot lessons to test in their own classrooms. In general, the outcome of a teacher's inclusive efforts is dependent on the time spent trying to learn. However, a lack of understanding is not the only challenge posed when implementing an inclusive curriculum. The challenge that is experienced most often is pushback to inclusive practices.

## **FAMILIES**

Pushback comes in many forms, and it can be seen inside or outside of the classroom. When dealing with pushback, teachers must remain firm in their efforts while still respecting the families of students in their communities. To build trust between the teacher and families,

consistent communication and transparency between the teacher and families are important (Colter Interview). Ensuring that parents are aware of what is being taught in the classroom often allows feelings of discomfort to begin to fade as it completely erases the “unknown elements” of inclusive curriculum that some parents can get anxious about. Creating opportunities for parents to learn through hosting events such as parent nights is also a great way to directly communicate with families about the curriculum and address any concerns they have (Colter Interview). If parent nights are not an option, consistently offering one on one meetings with parents is a great way to keep the flow of discussion and information going (Gravely Interview). Overall, the most important thing is for teachers to always keep themselves available to talk with parents.

Communication is key when dealing with pushback from families because it not only creates the opportunity for education on the parents’ behalfs, but it also sets the foundation for a teacher to defend their inclusive decisions if the pushback persists. In the face of continued pushback, teachers should explicitly explain the facts behind their inclusive practices and remain firm in providing an inclusive environment in their classroom. Angelique Gravely, a school counselor from Philadelphia, does this by making it a point to communicate with parents that inclusive efforts have nothing to do with belief, but are rather centered around the safety of students and ensuring that they all feel welcome in their place of education (Gravely Interview). She also reiterates the fact that inclusive efforts are important because it is a school’s duty to prepare all of its students for their future, and regardless of beliefs, students will need to know how to interact with others civilly and professionally (Gravely Interview).

Standards and policies can also be key in defending inclusive classroom practices. The Southern Poverty Law Center has a set of Social Justice Standards that serve as a, “road map for anti-bias education at every stage of K–12 instruction” (See Appendix C). Standards such as these allow teachers to ground their practices in objective national goals, rather than personal beliefs. Additionally, as of January 20, 2021, there is now an executive order around

non-discrimination protections that can be used to support a teacher's or school's efforts. This executive order prevents and combats discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation and enforces Title IX's protections. With this executive order, the Biden administration has made it clear that they will follow and enforce existing federal laws that protect LGBTQ+ people from discrimination, and this executive order specifically includes schools as a place where those laws will be enforced (E.O. 13988 of Jan 20, 2021). However, states and local governments have vast control over school environments. Knowing this, using and uplifting community voices is just as important to building buy-in among students and families. Those who have lived experiences that directly relate to inclusive efforts should be urged to step up and support teachers (Chiappano Interview). Unification within local communities will only strengthen the fight and make it clear that there is no going back to "normal" when student lives are on the line. Everything that a teacher does should be about the best outcome for their students, and inclusivity is non negotiably in the best interest of *all* students.

## **STUDENTS**

At first glance, the approach for dealing with student pushback is a bit different compared to the approach when dealing with familial pushback. Education is the root of a classroom, and one cannot learn if one is not allowed to ask questions and participate in healthy discourse. As a result of this, Harriet Schwartz, a professor at Carlow, makes sure that she creates space for her students to push back and challenge ideas a little bit. Not only does this promote discussion, and therefore education, but it also prevents students from not admitting to not understanding the importance of inclusive efforts and behavior (Schwartz Interview). Allowing students to express themselves, regardless of beliefs means that the healthy and appropriate expression of all beliefs, even those that may not be deemed agreeable by some, has to be allowed. By doing this, the teacher will make space for their students to then say

things such as “this makes me uncomfortable.” At that point, a teacher can now help the student explore *why* it makes them uncomfortable (Pero Interview, 2021). The teacher has now created a learning experience without confrontation or aggression. It is also important for a teacher to always communicate with their students. If asked why, clarify why. Shutting down discussion prevents education, and the central goal is to teach.

If pushback from a student persists, then it becomes the time for a teacher to begin setting their foot down, especially if the pushback becomes disruptive or offensive. Inappropriate language or remarks can be handled by consistently reminding students that certain words, statements, and behaviors are unacceptable and that there will be consequences if they are reported or witnessed. In their role as an authority figure, a teacher is often a student's primary source of defense at school, and so it is important that teachers communicate and show that they can be a reliable resource. Overall, the same methods used with parents and families can be utilized with students if the situation calls for it. Showing the data and going over standards as well as school policies and federal policies can be a clear way to defend inclusive practices. By establishing classroom rules and norms at the beginning of the school year, teachers can directly communicate with their students what is expected and accepted. When facing extreme pushback, such as crude remarks or harassment, because they previously communicated behavioral expectations, a teacher can begin a restoration process in the classroom. The first part of restoring the classroom is ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the student(s) who may be harmed by anti-LGBTQ+ actions or statements. This can be done by removing the offending student from the classroom, but a follow-up with this student is just as important. Rather than using disciplinary measures as a first resort, intervention on a teacher's part can be the first step to education and prevention. If repeat offenses continue to occur, it is crucial to involve school counselors because there may be a reason that the student is lashing out.

Ultimately, a teacher's biggest responsibility is supporting their students in the best way possible and letting them know that they are there for them. Work around inclusivity can be

tough, and when facing pushback, the pressure can be stressful. It is important that teachers remind themselves of the reason and motivation behind their hard work and also know that they do not have to take on everything while on this journey. As one third grade teacher reflected, “if you don't have anyone questioning or pushing back on what you're doing, you're probably not doing enough” (Colter Interview).

## **CONCLUSION**

As a teacher, inclusive intentions can be reflected and displayed in many ways, but the most important places that inclusivity can be displayed is through a teacher's curriculum and classroom. A curriculum that highlights a variety of lived experiences and identities naturally allows for a teacher's classroom to become an inclusive space. That inclusive space can then be further developed by using the physical state of a classroom, the attitudes that are promoted in the classroom, and the language that is used in the classroom as tools to extend the ways that inclusivity is communicated with the students. Creating inclusive classrooms and curricula acknowledges and affirms all students' identities, creating not just safe spaces, but spaces where students can thrive.

In the face of challenges and pushback, teachers must equip themselves with the proper tools to overcome the resistance. By first establishing a standard level of background knowledge and education around inclusivity and the ways with which to be inclusive, educators can begin their journey towards inclusivity with an advantage. This background knowledge not only can allow teachers to form stronger connections with students, but can also be used to handle other challenges such as pushback. Knowing the importance of their mission, as well as an understanding of policies and standards gives a teacher a solid foundation to stand on and may create a line of defense in the face of pushback. Overall, all efforts for inclusivity are important and they need to be done. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of an English classroom, it is the ideal place to begin, however, the work can and needs to be done in all types of classrooms with the proper planning.

***“Inclusivity doesn't just happen. It's conscious choices on the parts of teachers and administrators to make sure that policies and curriculum are inclusive.”***

***- Jennifer Kane***

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## Appendix A. *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* Compare, Contrast, Critique

### ***Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda: Compare, Contrast, Critique*** **(Teacher's Guide)**

#### **Grade level:**

9th-12th English Language Arts

#### **Standards Addressed:**

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.19-12.1**
  - Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1 and CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1**
  - Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

#### **Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda Overview:**

Sixteen-year-old and not-so-openly gay Simon Spier prefers to save his drama for the school musical. But when an email falls into the wrong hands, his secret is at risk of being thrust into the spotlight. Now, change-averse Simon has to find a way to step out of his comfort zone before he's pushed out--without alienating his friends, compromising himself, or fumbling a shot at happiness with the most confusing, adorable guy he's never met.

#### **Requirements for the Assignment:**

- The class has read *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli and have taken notes on it;
- The class has watched the movie adaptation of the book (*Love, Simon*) and have taken notes on it.

#### **Lesson Overview:**

In this lesson, students who have both read *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and watched the movie adaptation, *Love, Simon*, will compare and contrast the two in terms of plot, characters, setting, themes, and resolution. The in-class portion of the assignment will utilize a "Think, Pair, Share" format. Students will start off by individually brainstorming similarities and differences between the book and film for five minutes. They will then transition into a paired brainstorming session for another five minutes. After they have finished brainstorming individually and with their partner, the class as a whole will regroup to discuss the similarities and differences together. They should be instructed to add any similarities /differences that they did not already have written down. For the class discussion portion of the lesson, the class should start elaborating on each point added so that their open conversation will help them transition into the homework assignment. After the open discussion, students will then break away into individual work that will be assigned as homework; they should choose one or two similarities and differences from the class list to discuss in more detail in a short comparative essay. They will do so by writing a paragraph about each point that they plan to discuss. Each paragraph should include a brief overview of their chosen similarity/difference and how they are addressed in both the movie and the book. Direct quotes from the book or a brief synopsis of

movie scenes should be used as evidence. The overall purpose of this assignment is to encourage critical thinking and analysis amongst students.

### **Materials:**

- 1.) Printed out versions of the attached Venn diagram
- 2.) Markers to create a bigger Venn diagram on the board for the class discussion
- 3.) Student hard copies of the book
- 4.) Student notes on the movie

### **Time:**

- 30 minutes in class
  - Think pair share
    - 5 minutes individually
    - 5 minutes with a partner
    - 20 minutes as a class
  - Part 2 assigned as homework

### **Steps:**

- 1.) Introduce the lesson to students. For example, “Today we will be discussing the book *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and the book adaptation of it, *Love, Simon*. We will be comparing and contrasting the two and critiquing both.”
- 2.) Pass out the printed Venn diagrams and create a larger one on the board. Students should have previously taken notes on the movie and the book to guide with brainstorming themes to discuss. To begin, they should take five minutes to individually brainstorm some similarities and differences. Then, they should choose a partner to share their ideas with for another five minutes. After they have finished their brainstorming, the class should regroup and begin listing out similarities and differences on the board. During this time, students should begin to take the time to elaborate and address specific questions that expand on each similarity and difference. **(Note: there may be some specific similarities that you may want to address and it is recommended that you add them to the list and encourage students to discuss them)**

#### **a.) A few suggested points:**

- i.) **The theme of masculinity**
  - (1) What does masculinity look like in the book and film?
  - (2) Is masculinity objective or subjective?
  - (3) How does the story/movie address masculinity?
- ii.) **The theme of bullying**
  - (1) What is bullying?
  - (2) How has the internet changed the dynamic of bullying?
  - (3) How did the bullying impact Simon’s character in the book and film?
- iii.) **Leah’s character**
  - (1) How she is used as a character in both the movie and the book?

(2) Why would a film version change Leah's love interest? How does this change how we see her character?

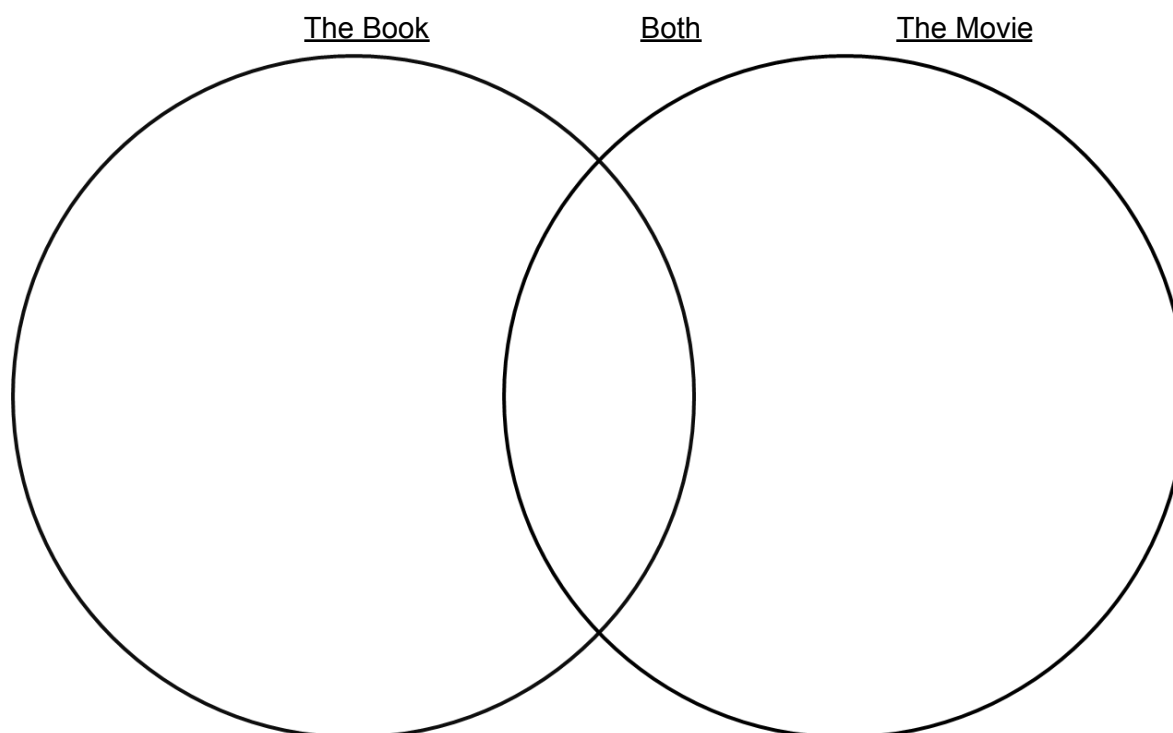
- b.) Ask the students to elaborate whenever possible and begin to pull direct quotes or scene summaries from either the book or the movie. Ensure that they are using their notes to guide this open discussion.
- 3.) End the in-class lesson and assign part two as homework. Students may want to choose one or two points before leaving class.
- 4.) In their short comparative essays, students should elaborate on their one to two chosen points in detail. They will now begin to expand on their compare and contrast activity by critiquing their chosen similarities or differences and discussing how they impact and shape the story. They should use their notes to provide evidence from their opinions. Evidence is a must for the assignment.

## Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda: Compare, Contrast, Critique

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Class Period: \_\_\_\_\_

### Part 1:

**Instructions:** Take five minutes to brainstorm some similarities and differences between the film and the movie. After, take another five minutes to share these ideas with a partner. We will regroup as a class to begin to discuss in more detail the similarities and differences.



### Part 2:

**Instructions:** As homework, you will choose one or two points from the class Venn-diagram to discuss in more detail. Elaborate on how the similarities or differences shape the story and the importance or lack of importance they have. Use direct quotes or scene summaries from the book and the movie to support your opinion.

## Appendix B. *The Meaning of Birds* Teacher Discussion Guide

### ***The Meaning of Birds* Teacher Discussion Guide**

*Follow-up questions for students after they read *The Meaning of Birds* by Jaye Robin Brown*

#### **Grade level:**

9th-12th English Language Arts

#### **Standards Addressed:**

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3**
  - Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.19-12.1**
  - Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1 and CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1**
  - Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.10**
  - By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
  - By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

#### **The Meaning of Birds Overview:**

**Before:** Since her father's death, Jessica has struggled with the anger building inside her. And being one of the only out teens in school hasn't helped. But everything changes when effervescent Vivi crashes into her life. As their relationship blossoms, Vivi both helps Jess deal with her pain and encourages her to embrace her talent as an artist. Suddenly the future is like a blank canvas, filled with possibilities.

**After:** Jess's perfect world vanishes when Vivi unexpectedly passes away during senior year. Reeling from another devastating loss, Jess falls back into her old ways, getting into fights and pushing away her loved ones. And she trashes her plans for art school, because art is Vivi and Vivi is gone. Desperate to escape her grief, Jess throws herself into her gritty work-study program, letting her dreams die—until she makes an unexpected friend who shows her a new way to channel her anger, passion, and creativity. Jess may never draw again, but if she can find a way to heal, she might be able to forge a new path for herself.

#### **Requirements for the Assignment:**

- The class has read *The Meaning of Birds* by Jaye Robin Brown and have preferably taken notes on it.

**Lesson Overview:**

In this lesson, students who have read *The Meaning of Birds* will gather for a discussion about the plot, characters, setting, themes, and overall story. Students will start off by individually gathering plot points and ideas that they would like to address for five to ten minutes. They will then transition into a whole-class discussion where they use an open discussion format. For the class discussion portion of the lesson, the teacher should begin by using the T.D.G.'s questions as a guide for the discussion. The class should also be encouraged to elaborate on their own ideas and questions. Using direct quotes from the book or a brief synopsis of scenes as evidence is encouraged. The overall purpose of this assignment is to encourage critical thinking, analysis, and collaboration amongst students.

**Materials:**

- 1.) Student hard copies of the book
- 2.) Student notes on the book

**Time:**

- 35-45 minutes in class
  - Think & Share
    - 5-10 minutes individually
    - 30-35 minutes as a class

**Steps:**

- 1.) Introduce the lesson to students. For example, "Today we will be discussing the book *The Meaning of Birds*. We will be talking as a class, elaborating on and analyzing different ideas mentioned or inspired by the book."
- 2.) Instruct students to begin gathering their notes if they have taken any (it is encouraged that they have). To begin, they should take five to ten minutes to individually brainstorm some ideas, themes, or questions to discuss. After they have finished their brainstorming, the class should regroup and the teacher should begin the discussion by asking the first discussion questions. Then, as the discussion progresses, students can begin asking their own questions to the class or mentioning their own ideas. During this time, students should elaborate and address specific ideas that expand on each question or point brought up.
- 3.) Ask the students to elaborate whenever possible and begin to pull direct quotes or scene summaries from the book. Ensure that they are using their notes to guide this open discussion.
- 4.) End the in-class lesson.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Different characters showed grief in different ways throughout the story. How could these differences have influenced their relationships during the story?
2. Earlier in Jess' life, she experienced the loss of her father. How do you think this previous loss affected the way she grieved Vivi?
3. How did both sisters show love toward one another in their own ways? Do you think their differences made their relationship stronger or weaker?
4. Jess's expectations for her future differed from those put on her by Vivi, her mother, and her friends. How do you balance others' expectations with your own? If you could have a conversation with Jess about this, what would you tell her?
5. In the story, various beliefs and opinions about Jess and Vivi's relationship are depicted. In the weeks following Vivi's death, Jess hears a boy say, "Sick dyke deserved it anyway," in reference to Vivi's death. Have you ever heard hateful language before in school? What do you think stops people from speaking up against it?
6. Throughout the story, many of Jess' friendships are described. What does friendship mean to you? If you were Jess' friend, how would you navigate your friendship with her during the period of grieving for Vivi?
7. *The Meaning of Birds* gives representation to an older queer couple who takes Jess under their wings. Why do you think this was important for the development of Jess' story? How are they significant for creating positive representation of LGBTQ+ couples?

### Appendix C. The Southern Poverty Law Center’s Social Justice Standards

Anchor Standard	Code	Grade Level Outcome	Anti-bias Scenario
Identity 1	ID.9-12.1	I have a positive view of myself, including an awareness of and comfort with my membership in multiple groups in society.	As part of a class project, Rebecca completes the following personal mission statement: “I am more than one identity. I will celebrate all of my in-group and out-group identities and work to understand how they overlap to make up who I am as an individual. I will not allow others to put me into boxes.” Rebecca explains to her peers in small-group discussion that being a student, sister, female, Latina, Spanish speaker and dancer are all interconnected and equally important. She displays her personal mission statement on the outside of her class binder.
Identity 2	ID.9-12.2	I know my family history and cultural background and can describe how my own identity is informed and shaped by my membership in multiple identity groups.	
Identity 3	ID.9-12.3	I know that all my group identities and the intersection of those identities create unique aspects of who I am and that this is true for other people too.	
Identity 4	ID.9-12.4	I express pride and confidence in my identity without perceiving or treating anyone else as inferior.	
Identity 5	ID.9-12.5	I recognize traits of the dominant culture, my home culture and other cultures, and I am conscious of how I express my identity as I move between those spaces.	
Diversity 6	DI.9-12.6	I interact comfortably and respectfully with all people, whether they are similar to or different from me.	Sheri is a student ambassador, welcoming new students and showing them around the school. She mentions to one new student, Kyle, that she helped found the school’s Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). Kyle confides in her that he is actually transgender and changed schools after beginning transition. Sheri tells him that she will be discreet and assures him that the administration is welcoming. Kyle recounts this story fondly at a later meeting with the school’s counselor.
Diversity 7	DI.9-12.7	I have the language and knowledge to accurately and respectfully describe how people (including myself) are both similar to and different from each other and others in their identity groups.	
Diversity 8	DI.9-12.8	I respectfully express curiosity about the history and lived experiences of others and exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way.	
Diversity 9	DI.9-12.9	I relate to and build connections with other people by showing them empathy, respect and understanding, regardless of our similarities or differences.	
Diversity 10	DI.9-12.10	I understand that diversity includes the impact of unequal power relations on the development of group identities and cultures.	



Justice 11	JU.9-12.11	I relate to all people as individuals rather than representatives of groups and can identify stereotypes when I see or hear them.	<p>Karen notices that many of her school's facilities are not friendly to those with disabilities. Many students have difficulty navigating the school and are often late to class as a result. Karen decides to look into building plans to determine if any accommodations are present for those in the community with physical limitations. She forms a focus group of students and faculty to come up with effective solutions to the situation.</p>
Justice 12	JU.9-12.12	I can recognize, describe and distinguish unfairness and injustice at different levels of society.	
Justice 13	JU.9-12.13	I can explain the short and long-term impact of biased words and behaviors and unjust practices, laws and institutions that limit the rights and freedoms of people based on their identity groups.	
Justice 14	JU.9-12.14	I am aware of the advantages and disadvantages I have in society because of my membership in different identity groups, and I know how this has affected my life.	
Justice 15	JU.9-12.15	I can identify figures, groups, events and a variety of strategies and philosophies relevant to the history of social justice around the world.	
Action 16	AC.9-12.16	I express empathy when people are excluded or mistreated because of their identities and concern when I personally experience bias.	<p>Lee has grown weary of the bullying he sees at his school each day. He discusses his concerns with classmates, teachers and administrators to develop a plan to combat the situation. Together, they plan Mix It Up at Lunch Day to promote a greater sense of cohesion among the diverse student body. The day is used to celebrate the launch of a new diversity club, aimed at bringing diverse students together and combating baseless animosity through ongoing intergroup activities.</p>
Action 17	AC.9-12.17	I take responsibility for standing up to exclusion, prejudice and injustice.	
Action 18	AC.9-12.18	I have the courage to speak up to people when their words, actions or views are biased and hurtful, and I will communicate with respect even when we disagree.	
Action 19	AC.9-12.19	I stand up to exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, even when it's not popular or easy or when no one else does.	
Action 20	AC.9-12.20	I will join with diverse people to plan and carry out collective action against exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, and we will be thoughtful and creative in our actions in order to achieve our goals.	