

# LGBTQ+ Issues in Social Education: Understanding, Inclusion, and Advocacy

Gloria T. Alter

LGBTQ+ issues continue to be front-page news, often with stories that address controversies over the rights of gender and sexual minorities or hate crimes and suicides.<sup>1</sup> Heartbreaking stories of lives lost reveal the extraordinary damage caused by hate, fear, and misunderstanding.

One example, on February 12, 2008, was the killing of 8th grader Lawrence (Larry) King, 15, shot in the back of the head, execution style, by Brandon McInerney, 14, during a lesson on World War II at Green Junior High, in Oxnard, California. The documentary *Valentine Road* tells Larry's story.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the viciousness of the crime, many people in the community supported Brandon, and blamed Larry for his own murder. His gender-nonconforming behavior was said to be "very disturbing to all the boys," and Brandon's attorney argued that "Larry provoked Brandon into doing what he did." Larry wore makeup and high heels and carried a purse to school. Some said that Larry was trying to flaunt his sexuality to get attention. Others saw that he was trying to defend "a stigmatized identity" and find a way to "make it through the day."

Religious and cultural views influenced the ways in which the school and its personnel responded to the situation. Shirley Brown, who had been Larry's 7th grade teacher, said "Larry shouldn't have expressed himself so blatantly, openly, transsexual." She also remarked, "I do believe in a heaven and a hell and ... Larry honestly did not even have a clue [about] the consequences of his actions."

Ms. Brown's response to Brandon's

crime was disturbing: "I relate to Brandon because I could see my own self, being in that very same position. I don't know if I would have taken a gun, but a good swift kick in the butt might [have] work[ed] really well," she said, smiling.

According to the documentary, a teacher who supported Larry's gender transition lost her job, and the school would not allow a tree to be planted in memory of Larry.

Social educators can challenge such negative attitudes and beliefs by exposing students to narratives of injustice in the context of human rights, and helping students to develop positive relationships with gender and sexual minorities.<sup>3</sup>

Human rights education plays a fundamental role in guarding against attitudes and beliefs that lead to injustice. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) affirmed in a position statement its support for the teaching of human rights in social studies, recognizing that everyone is entitled to certain rights based upon our common humanity and our democratic ideals.<sup>4</sup> NCSS further supports the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues in the social studies

curriculum.<sup>5</sup> The NCSS resolution on inclusion acknowledged the existence of misunderstanding, misinformation, and aggression toward the LGBTQ+ community; laws that negate LGBTQ+ rights; prohibitions against teaching about gender and sexuality issues; the dangers this causes to children and youth; and the need to enact measures that increase the "health, safety, and learning" of the LGBTQ+ community. Inclusive curriculum and the affirmation of LGBTQ+ identities are key components that support students and their education.

Practices vary greatly in school districts around the country, as each faces unique challenges. Some state laws and curriculum frameworks have begun to incorporate the study of gender and sexual minorities, especially in social studies education. These developments are possible because recent social and institutional changes have affirmed the LGBTQ+ community, increased its visibility, and demonstrated the relevancy of LGBTQ+ curriculum for students today.<sup>6</sup> As a result, schools, districts, and teachers are finding ways, even in conservative areas, to provide LGBTQ+ -inclusive education by building upon the values of diversity and equality established in school mission statements.<sup>7</sup>



Many teachers want to integrate LGBTQ+ content, but don't know how or where to begin. This issue of *Social Education* suggests many ways of doing so. Our first article (Gloria T. Alter) focuses on teaching LGBTQ+ concepts; discussing gender and sexual diversity issues; and promoting an understanding of the LGBTQ+ people's rights movement and subsequent social activism. A unit example on the Stonewall Riots illustrates instructional principles and includes teacher resources. "Milestones in the American LGBT Civil Rights Movement," developed by the One Archives Foundation (Jamie Coker-Robertson, Kyle Morgan, and Helen Aldana), is one of the resources incorporated into the unit plan. It provides a sense of historical context for the Stonewall Riots, and can be used as a stand alone tool to raise questions about connections between the past and present, recurring themes/issues over time, and cause and effect, among other subjects.

Along with strong instructional strategies, teachers and administrators need to provide a safe environment for LGBTQ students. David Campos writes about the serious problem of student bullying, the different types of bullying, and how it affects LGBTQ youth. He then discusses practices that promote a secure learning environment for students and ways to advance equality and inclusiveness. These informative guidelines are coupled with a list of definitions of LGBTQ terms and a case study. The case study includes specific tips for school leaders on how to stop bullying, help those being bullied, and prevent future bullying.

Bárbara C. Cruz and Robert W. Bailey provide a brief history of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the K-12 curriculum, as well as a review of its current status. They build a case for LGBTQ+ social studies curriculum inclusion and discuss the issues that typically arise in bringing this about. Their article offers specific ideas for the implementation of LGBTQ+ content/perspectives into world and U.S.

history, law and government, sociology, anthropology, and other social sciences, as well as particular ways to integrate LGBTQ+ issues into elementary social studies.

J.B. Mayo Jr.'s article reveals how cultural representations of LGBTQ people have changed over time and how creative inquiry can incorporate engaging LGBTQ images to raise awareness of and challenge our assumptions about gender and sexual diversity. Ideas for integrating critical media literacy into the classroom are included.

Jamie Campbell Naidoo, author of two books on LGBTQ children's literature (*Rainbow Family Collections* and *A World of Rainbow Families*, published by Libraries Unlimited), discusses LGBT curriculum inclusion from the perspective of changing demographics and family compositions. Jamie discusses culturally diverse LGBTQ literature and gives examples to guide teachers in using particular books to meet individual student needs. He also gives advice on how to locate LGBTQ children's literature and how to address sensitive issues that arise when introducing LGBTQ books into the classroom.

Our final article addresses legal issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity in public schools. Maria M. Lewis, Allison Fetter-Harrott, Jeffrey C. Sun, and Suzanne E. Eckes examine bullying and harassment, freedom of speech, transgender student access, employment and sexual orientation, and action and advocacy. They also include guidelines for teachers and recommended resources.

Teachers face unique challenges as they integrate LGBTQ+ content into the social studies curriculum. They need to learn new knowledge and skills, consider their values and commitments, and take responsibility for keeping LGBTQ+ students safe from bullying and harassment by peers and even school personnel.<sup>8</sup> As awareness and understanding of gender and sexual diversity grows, affirmation of our common humanity should become more commonplace and differences in our beliefs should have less power to

divide us and give rise to hate.<sup>9</sup> Teaching the truth about human rights, affirming our students, and keeping them safe are the most important things we can do.🌈

#### Notes

1. The acronym LGBTQ+ indicates lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other (such as intersex or more nuanced terms).
2. Marta Cunningham (Producer & Director), *Valentine Road* (BMP Films, HBO Documentary Films, 2012), DVD, 88 min. All quotations in this paragraph and the next ones are from the documentary.
3. See also: Alex Morris, "The Forsaken: A Rising Number of Homeless Gay Teens Are Being Cast Out by Religious Families," *Rolling Stone* 1217 (September 3, 2014), [www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/the-forsaken-a-rising-number-of-homeless-gay-teens-are-being-cast-out-by-religious-families-20140903](http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/the-forsaken-a-rising-number-of-homeless-gay-teens-are-being-cast-out-by-religious-families-20140903); Daniel Karlsake, *For the Bible Tells Me So* (2007), DVD, 95 min.; Sabrina Rubin Erdely, "One Town's War on Gay Teens," *Rolling Stone* 1150 (February 16, 2012), [www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/one-towns-war-on-gay-teens-20120202](http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/one-towns-war-on-gay-teens-20120202).
4. NCSS, "Human Rights Education: A Necessity for Effective Social and Civic Learning," [www.socialstudies.org/positions/human\\_rights\\_education\\_2014](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/human_rights_education_2014).
5. NCSS, "Resolution #16-02-4 for the Explicit Support of NCSS for the Inclusion of LGBTQ+ Issues in the Social Studies Classroom," [www.socialstudies.org/publications/socialeducation/may-june2017/2016-ncss-house-of-delegates-resolutions](http://www.socialstudies.org/publications/socialeducation/may-june2017/2016-ncss-house-of-delegates-resolutions).
6. Michael Sadowski, *Safe is Not Enough, Better Schools for LGBTQ Students* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press, 2016).
7. Ibid.
8. J.C. Kosciw, E.A. Greytak, and N.W. Giga, C. Villenas, and D.J. Danischewski, *The 2015 National School Climate Survey* (Washington, D.C.: GLSEN, 2016), [www.glsen.org/article/2015-national-school-climate-survey](http://www.glsen.org/article/2015-national-school-climate-survey).
9. A great resource to increase awareness of gender and sexual diversity is Katie Couric and Mitch Semel (Executive Producers), *Gender Revolution, A Journey With Katie Couric* (Katie Couric Media, 2017), DVD, 120 min. The DVD is paired with the *National Geographic* "Gender Revolution, Special Issue," January 2017, [www.natgeo.com/gender-revolution](http://www.natgeo.com/gender-revolution).

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