

Tolerance and Tolerance Education - An Introduction

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Tolerance Degrees

Tolerance cannot be taken for granted. Its practice is difficult, and the lack of tolerance is the problem. What do we understand by tolerance? Apparently, we almost all have something different in mind. A closer look at the diversity of tolerance concepts reveals different degrees of progressing tolerance:

1. the pragmatic calculating tolerance
2. the rights based tolerance
3. the active interfering tolerance

1. One reason for tolerance is of a pragmatic calculating kind, since social and economic advantages and benefits gained out of practicing tolerance seemed to be higher than the costs of intolerance. Where tolerance is absent, or lacking, and intolerance is predominant, the result is that hate, violence and victims flourish and proliferate. Tolerance matters for the individual and for the society. Tolerance is, therefore, never an end in itself but a powerful means towards a number of important ends, such as:

- conflict resolution and the making of peace;
- the promotion of democracy;
- the development of wealth; and,
- the formation of an international reputation for tolerance.

Such pragmatic calculation could also be decisive at the end of a violent conflict between two almost equally strong enemies, who were aware that they had rather endure the enemy's rights, since the price of intolerance would have been too high.

2. It was already during the Enlightenment that a stronger argument for tolerance gained acceptance - even though without replacing the old pragmatic calculating one: All people must be tolerated because everybody has a right to it. Every person must be granted the freedom of being different, for it is a human right. And it is people's task to tolerate the outcome of the others' freedom.

3. A third concept reflects the concept of positive tolerance as understood by UNESCO. Tolerance is more than the mere absence of intolerance. It implies our involvement in creating an environment in which tolerance is possible.

We can conclude from this short overview that the question is not only whether somebody is tolerant, but also how tolerant he/she is.

Opponents to Tolerance

In order to avoid shortcomings, however, we have to take into account those individuals, groups or segments of the society, who are not at all interested in "tolerating tolerance." We see at least three of them:

1. those in power,
2. those, whose rights are violated and
3. those, who perceive tolerance as a risk or even a danger.

1. The historical experience suggests that power normally leads to the use of intolerance and to the practice of the 'rule of the strongest.' For those with power interests and in power positions the benefits of intolerance seem to top the benefits of tolerance.

2. Some case studies make clear that tolerance of itself has little impact or importance in their attempts to remedy the difficulties and dangers of their lives. When people within a society live and suffer under conditions of inequality, then their first demands are not for tolerance, but for human rights and democracy. "In an imbalanced power situation, the weaker party has no choice other than to 'tolerate' the stronger. The only way for them not to tolerate the stronger party is actively to rebel ... to talk of teaching human rights is much more clear ..." It is therefore clear that, in those countries or regions where there are unacceptable human inequalities, and where the cleavages are too deep and too hot, then it may be impossible to build bridges and to construct the ties of tolerance. This conclusion is not intended as a rejection of tolerance, but it is a recognition of the need for social change in order to establish the preconditions for tolerance.

3. Finally there is another group for whom tolerance can seem like a risk or even a threat. This group is made up of those who have not been able to develop the competencies necessary to feel sufficiently secure: without this sense of security they feel threatened by difference, and so find it difficult – even at times impossible - to tolerate others. This is particularly so when the 'others' are obviously different from themselves, in the way they look or speak or act. The lack of internal resources and competencies therefore, especially of self-esteem, can lead to fear and stress, and fear and stress will often lead to the rejection of tolerance.

Tolerance-Thresholds

It's a fact that most people consider themselves tolerant until challenged to their 'tolerance threshold: The tolerance threshold in a society can be conceived as a stress threshold: The higher the social stress of a crisis, the lower the probability that stressed citizens act in a tolerant way. Social stress deals with the ratio between social and political demands, on the one hand, and people's felt capacity to meet them, on the other. As an example, we might consider the categories and the number of foreigners tolerated within a society. No absolute figures or proportions of the number of migrants tolerated can be given. The number rather depends on the ability and willingness of the citizens to accept foreigners in their society.

Tolerance Education

It would certainly be an abstract utopia to hope that we could live without intolerance. A world without those circumstances provoking intolerance seems to be impossible. However, there are numerous ways of reducing intolerance and promoting tolerance. Tolerance as a competence of citizens should not just be requested, but tolerance has to be learned. Pedagogical efforts to promote education for tolerance - especially within the activities of UNESCO and of the Council of Europe- have been quite impressive. A common aspect of the majority of these programmes and initiatives is the assumption that citizens with a balanced self-esteem do not develop the need to exclude, devalue or attack others. They are capable of tolerance. Imparting a strong and balanced self-esteem is one of the most important competences we know. Only those who have experienced recognition themselves are able to recognize the rights of others. Empowerment is the "magic word" for this task. Empowerment is a precondition for sharing rights and responsibilities with others. Empowerment works as prevention against the feelings of fear, stress, insecurity, powerlessness and inferiority which are the fruitful ground for excluding and discriminating others.

Another decisive approach to the development of tolerance is the so-called "multiperspectivity". "Multiperspectivity" means to be able and willing to regard a situation from different perspectives. This ability should be learnt at an early stage so that the willingness to take over another perspective will not be blocked by prejudice and fear. Precondition and part of "multiperspectivity" is the knowledge of one's own perspective. The awareness of one's own position reveals what we fear of the other - the foreign - person.

The ability to change the perspective also requires the capacity to understand in how far the other perspective can be seen as a reaction to one's own behaviour. It is also important to ask in how far another person's intolerance can be identified as a reaction to one's own - interpreted or misinterpreted - behaviour. This intolerance could then be overcome through a change in one's own behaviour.

Tolerance and Human Rights Education

The conditions of modernisation force the citizens to shape the growing varieties and diversity of their own freedoms and endure the freedoms of others. In the broad UNESCO understanding of the term "Human Rights Education" tolerance education is already included. At the same time there is a need to explain the inner connections between human rights and tolerance for better understanding.

First of all human rights are legally recoverable rights of the citizen towards the state, even though the argument is gaining ground that human rights consist as well of mutual moral rights that citizens can ask from each other. Human rights have a legal side and a moral side influencing the standards of the civil society. Tolerance consists first of all of moral claims that citizens can ask from each other. Human rights have a focus on the relationship between the state and the individual, tolerance has its focus predominantly on the relationships within the civil

society. In the case of the violations of human rights you can ask for legal or political sanctions, in the case of the violations of tolerance standards, you can only ask for moral sanctions.

One focus of HRE is the knowledge of the nationally guaranteed and internationally standardised human rights, as well as their institutions of protection and their defenders. However HRE should not just mediate knowledge, but has to make the values behind the rights and the institutions comprehensible. HRE aims at the development of an awareness of human rights: the knowledge of your own rights, the willingness to accept the same rights for others and to support the defence of the rights of all people according to one's own possibilities.

A willingness to defend one's own rights play a leading role in human rights competence. It is easy when it comes to your own rights, but hard to be supportive of the acceptance of the rights of the others. This kind of education should not only make the individual aware of his or her own rights but should also at the same time instill respects for the rights of others. However, even where human rights of others are accepted in an abstract way, intolerance still exists, very often towards what people actually do with their right to be free and different. To promote this willingness to accept difference is one of the major tasks of tolerance education. One main link between human rights educations and tolerance education is about that connection between acceptance of equality and accepting difference.

A questions which should be discussed: Is there a risk that educational strategies of empowerment lead to violent actions of the learners? What does it mean in terms of tolerant and intolerant behavior that you have to become a rebel in order to get your human rights? Is it possible that human rights education and peace education become sometimes contradictory?

The "Tolerance Gap" after September 11

Finally we are facing new kinds of risks and threats. In addition to the stress coming from the processes of social and political transformation as well as globalization we are confronted with a new "wave" of global insecurity produced by international terrorism and by the "war on terrorism." Our tasks are becoming more difficult now: How can we avoid to be caught in a climate of fear and hate where human rights and tolerance are sacrificed for security. We can observe something that might be called a "tolerance gap": On the one hand more tolerance is asked for, on the other hand it seems to become more and more difficult to be tolerant.

Faced by the present conflicts two outsets in the fostering of tolerance should be avoided in equal measure: On the one hand it's important to avoid 'overstretched tolerance' (Bassam Tibi) - this would be tolerance of a type which ignores that fact that the intolerant (the fundamentalists) often only complain of their own toleration so as to instrumentalize tolerance for extremely intolerant aims. On the other hand, it is also important to avoid any temptations of a generalized suspicion and of an "end of tolerance" in times of conflicts.

HRE after September 11 means building a stronger awareness for and about human rights under conditions of extreme insecurity and fear. This feeling of insecurity causes a deep reluctance towards human rights issues and even fosters processes of unlearning of human rights and human rights standards amongst many learners. What is needed is a new push of empowerment of the learners to enable them to cope better with the challenges of insecurity and to counter the feelings of powerlessness. The stress provoked by terrorism is on the one hand a result of the real violence and on the other hand it is a result of the interpretation of the threat of the violence and of the measures to be taken against it. Even though the real threat of terrorism cannot be “educated away”, it should be possible to prepare people to cope with the feelings that terrorism can provoke.

The influence of the public discourse

Tolerance and respect for human rights, however, are not only a consequence of individual competences, but also a result of the political, social and religious cultures of a society and of the actual political climate: a consequence of shared and publicly stated ideas and models of orientation within a society, which provide information as to how we want to deal with the multitude and alterity of cultures. The way in which reciprocal perception takes place is always also influenced by, and open to the influence of understandings and interpretations on offer in public discourse.

In many cases social stress is a stress produced by an opinionleader, and fears of excessive foreignness thrive only in a climate of public reinforcement. The perception of a reciprocal threat thus depends on the interpretations which are brought into the public discourse, and which are amplified by the mass media. The fear of being threatened can be aroused and increased by politicians talking about the dangers and the risks for the receiving societies and suspecting migrants. The careers of multiethnic conflicts will therefore also depend on the way we talk publicly about the chances and dangers of migration and terrorism.

Knowing that one influential factor for change is the public discourse, we have to think about chances and channels to influence this public discourse on tolerance and on human rights in order to improve the protection of human rights and to build a culture of tolerance and human rights.

Two conditions are thus indispensable for tolerance, i.e. 1. tolerance must be prepared and be learnt as individual competence 2. tolerance must be developed as a collective cultural pattern.