

TOLERANCE, DIVERSITY, AND RESPECT FOR CONSCIENCE: THE NEGLECTED ISSUE

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I recently received an e-mail from a graduate of our College. She wrote: “So much that has been said about tolerance and diversity encourages people to accept only one point of view. If religious beliefs differ from that point of view, freedom of speech is disregarded.”

Her comment takes us to the heart of a much-neglected dimension of the diversity discussion: *Authentic teaching of diversity must include respect for legitimate differences of moral and religious conscience.* In the 21st century, more than ever, educating for democracy requires that schools form citizens who can live harmoniously in an increasingly diverse society. But educating for diversity must have, as a core commitment, teaching respect for diversity of conscience. It must include the explicit recognition that persons of conscience may disagree, even profoundly, about issues ranging from personal moral choices to public policy. In a democratic society, an authentic respect for diversity enables us to live with our deepest differences, even as we continue to debate them.

What Is Tolerance and Its Relationship to Diversity?

Let me begin with a discussion of tolerance and its relationship to diversity. At least in recent times, most U. S. schools have regarded teaching tolerance as an important part of citizenship education. But many schools have also found tolerance to be a controversial issue. In some schools otherwise committed to character education, for example, tolerance is missing from the list of target virtues. (“We didn’t want to go *there*,” said one middle school principal.) Why is this so?

On the one hand, tolerance seems like a core human virtue, essential for democracy and civilized life. The absence of tolerance is at the root of much evil: peer cruelty, unjust discrimination, hate crimes, ethnic cleansing, religious and political persecution, genocide, and the terrorism that increasingly plagues our world.

On the other hand, if tolerance is defined, as it often is, as the ability to “respect and accept” other people’s values and beliefs, it poses problems. Do we really want our children to “respect and accept” all people’s values and beliefs, no matter what they are? What about the values of a racist and the beliefs of a terrorist? What about controversial issues—can we logically ask people who are on opposite sides of debates about abortion, homosexuality, and

other contested matters to “accept” each other’s views? Contradictory views cannot both be right.

To define tolerance as non-judgmental “acceptance” is to promote a kind of moral relativism and to ensure the rejection of tolerance education in many schools. All schools, however, can embrace tolerance as an essential civilizing virtue — *if* they define it correctly. Tolerance as an ethical virtue does not require us to accept other people’s beliefs or behaviors. Tolerance *does* require us to respect every person’s human dignity and human rights, including legitimate freedom of conscience.

Freedom of conscience, however, is not absolute. It is the liberty to make personal moral choices as long as those choices do not infringe on the rights of others or undermine the common good.

Our own freedom of conscience may sometimes lead us to take issue with other people’s moral choices, even seemingly “personal” ones. We might, out of a genuine concern for their welfare, try to persuade them that they are mistaken in their beliefs or behavior — that they are hurting themselves or others in ways they may not realize. For example, when a grown child decides to move in with his or her fiancé prior to marriage, some parents may feel conscience-led to gently encourage their child to reconsider that decision, perhaps in the light of religious precepts or the fact that the divorce rate is significantly higher for couples who cohabit before they are married. However, the virtue of tolerance would in such cases keep us from coercively interfering with the freedom of other adults to make decisions about their own lives.

Tolerance defined as respect for legitimate freedom of conscience enables us to disagree about controversial subjects such as abortion, capital punishment, stem cell research, premarital sex, homosexuality, condoms in schools, assisted suicide, and the like. Tolerance enables us to debate these differences in a civil and non-violent manner — a debate that is necessary for the development of enlightened and just public policies and for progress in resolving disputed issues.

The dictionary also defines tolerance as “a fair and objective attitude toward those whose opinions and practices differ from our own.” Tolerance in this sense is an intellectual virtue as well as an ethical one. It requires an effort to be objective, to understand those who are different from ourselves, to try to rise above irrational bias, and to seek the fullness of truth in a spirit of humility. For example, in the debate about abortion, tolerance would keep us in dialogue, however difficult, about what is truly right and just for all members of the human family, including women in crisis and babies in the womb.

Tolerance and Diversity

In our character education work with schools, our College’s Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect and Responsibility) has observed a growing trend: Many are replacing “tolerance”

with what seems like a more positive and, at least at first glance, less controversial virtue: "appreciation of diversity." What are the merits of this approach?

Students should in fact learn to value, and when possible directly experience, the rich human diversity found within different races, religions, countries, and cultures. Appreciating diversity means trying to find the best in all people, just as we want them to find the best in us. The *Children's Diversity Pledge* (see box below), cooperative learning, good multicultural literature, and the myriad of educational projects described in the pages of *Teaching Tolerance* magazine are all ways of helping students learn about and affirm diversity in this ethical sense. *Character Education Through Story: K-6 Lessons to Build Character Through Multicultural Literature* (2001), for example, demonstrates the universality of basic human virtues such as honesty, courage, perseverance, and love as well as the great diversity of ways these virtues are honored and taught in cultures around the world.

Children's Diversity Pledge

- *I believe that all kids are different and special in their own way.*
- *I believe that all kids deserve to be loved and respected for who they are.*
- *I will work on being a good friend, so that all children feel welcomed around me.*
- *I will not judge people because of where they live, the color of their skin, how they dress, their abilities, their spiritual beliefs, or whether they are a girl or a boy.*
- *I can and will find the good in all people.*
- *I will not tell or listen to jokes that make fun of other people.*
- *I will be a peacemaker in my family and school.*
- *I will show pride in my family and heritage.*
- *I will learn as much as I can about the family traditions of other kids in my school*

—adapted from Cultural Exchange Entertainment Corporation

However, a problem with "diversity" as an ethical category is that it is all-inclusive, encompassing all differences. Suicide bombers are part of diversity. So are Ku Klux Klanners, internet hate sites, and cultures that oppress women. Some forms of diverse sexual behavior would meet with approval from some persons and disapproval from others.

Conceptual clarity and intellectual honesty require us to recognize three kinds of diversity: (1) "*positive diversity*" that we wish to affirm, such as the different races, ethnic groups, and cultural strengths that make up our classrooms and communities; (2) "*negative diversity*" that all rational persons would morally reject, such as belief systems that sanction hatred or abuse of human rights; and (3) "*controversial diversity*," concerning matters about which people often do not agree, such as abortion and the proper relationship for sexual intimacy. "Appreciating diversity," in the sense of affirming its positive value, is clearly an appropriate educational goal for public schools only with regard to *category #1*—diversity that

we generally agree is positive or at least morally neutral. We obviously can't ask people to "appreciate" or "celebrate" beliefs and behaviors that violate their conscience.

In short, "appreciating diversity" can *complement* but should not replace "tolerance" on the list of character education virtues because some diversity is morally controversial. We need tolerance in order to address, with honesty and civility, that which divides us.

Tolerance and Sexual Orientation

Many of the most divisive issues in our culture fall into the sexual domain. Consider one that many schools struggle with: the issue of sexual orientation. A few years ago, the authors of an Educational Leadership article urged schools to "promote positive attitudes toward gay families, celebrate Gay Pride Week just as you do Black, Hispanic, and Women's History Months, and infuse famous gay people into your curriculum" — arguing that such steps are necessary in order to create "a welcoming school atmosphere for gay students and gay parents" and "an environment free of harassment, homophobia, and discrimination."

Is such advice educationally and ethically sound? Is it consistent with authentic tolerance and diversity education, one that includes respect for diverse moral and religious conscience? I would like to offer seven points—matters of truth and fairness, I believe—that can guide schools in implementing an approach to tolerance and diversity education that is respectful of diverse conscience concerning the complex issue of sexual orientation.

1. Schools must teach students to respect all people and should not tolerate violence or harassment toward any student or staff member for any reason. All persons, regardless of sexual orientation, deserve to be treated with justice and respect. Currently they are not. Said one young woman about her high school: "People here are *constantly* calling each other 'fags.' Or they say, 'You're so *gay*. I hear that a hundred times a day.'" Slurs such as these and other demeaning language or harassment based on sexual orientation should not be permitted in the school environment any more than we permit ethnic, racial, or religious denigration.

A "zero tolerance" policy for disrespectful behavior, however, is not enough. Comprehensive character education, integrated into every phase of school life—from the teacher's example to the handling of rules and discipline to the extracurricular program—is needed to develop an *inner attitude* of respect for all persons and to establish respect as normative within the school culture. Students should be made aware of the harassment some students have suffered because of their sexual orientation. Student government and other student groups, which are in the best position to influence the peer culture, should be assigned a leadership role in creating a school environment that is safe and respectful for all.

2. While teaching tolerance as respect for persons, schools must also teach respect for diversity of moral and religious conscience concerning sexual behavior. If schools treat the issue of sexual orientation, they must in truth teach that while some people consider

homosexual and bisexual sex morally acceptable, others do not. Teachers should make it clear that to have conscience-based objections to certain sexual behaviors does not make a person “prejudiced.” Students should learn what a prejudice is: a judgment that someone is inferior *as a person* because he or she is a member of a certain race, gender, or other group. By contrast, moral judgments concerning homosexual sex, bisexual sex, or premarital heterosexual sex are judgments about the rightness of certain sexual behaviors, not judgments about the worth or dignity of persons. One can affirm persons without affirming their sexual behavior.

To help students understand the difference between a prejudice and a conscience-based belief about sex, one needs to explain the larger vision of sexuality that might lead a person to disapprove of certain sexual behaviors. For example, orthodox Catholic and Protestant Christians, Muslims, and orthodox Jews believe (though individual members of these faith traditions sometimes dissent from their religion’s historical teaching) that sexual intimacy is reserved by God for a husband and wife in marriage. In this view, the two purposes of sex—the expression of faithful, committed love in a complementary union and the procreation of new life issuing from that union—can be fulfilled only in heterosexual marriage. By this standard, *all* forms of sex outside heterosexual marriage are considered wrong. Homosexual persons, like single heterosexuals, may enjoy intellectual, emotional, and spiritual intimacy with other persons but are called to refrain from sexual intimacy and to live chastely with the help of God’s grace.

These are truth claims, rooted in a world view. Others are certainly free to disagree with this vision. But it is not reasonable, respectful, or just—either to students or their families—to denigrate a conscience-based objection to sex outside heterosexual marriage by labeling it “homophobic” or “heterosexist” and then treating it as if it were the moral equivalent of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism. The message of tolerance and diversity education should not be, “Abandon your moral and religious beliefs,” but rather, “Treat all persons with respect, no matter how strongly you may disagree with them.”

If we wish to foster this ethic of respect, we will be careful to use a language of respect. Terms like “homophobia” may not meet that standard. If “homophobia” were used only to mean “fear or hatred of homosexuals,” all persons of character would agree we should reject such irrational attitudes. But “homophobia” is often either not defined or used in a broad-brush way to refer disparagingly to any disapproving judgment of homosexuality.

For example, after a representative of the Gay/Lesbian/Student/Teacher Network spoke on the campus of a private school, one of the outcomes was a rise in accusations of “homophobia” directed at “conservative” faculty. “These faculty were judged,” says a teacher at this school, “not on the basis of their actions but for not having the correct beliefs.” “Homophobia” is an ambiguous term at best, insulting at worst, and not likely to contribute to the mutual respect needed for ethical discourse about this sensitive issue.

3. *The school can create a safe, caring, and welcoming community for all students and parents without affirming all the lifestyle choices and sexual identities that may be present in its student and parent community.* Proposals to affirm “sexual minorities” through classroom discussions of gay families or through curricular integration of “famous gay people” may be well-meaning, inspired by the wish to help all students feel recognized and validated. But this approach does not work if the basis for validation is morally controversial.

Schools can and should affirm all members of the school community by treating everyone with warmth and respect, nurturing the gifts of all students, and inviting all students and parents to contribute actively to the life of the school. The school cannot, however, legitimately treat a controversial sexual behavior as a “cultural category” comparable to race, ethnicity, or religion and then affirm that sexual category in the name of having an “anti-bias curriculum.” For the school to affirm homosexual sexual activity in this way is to abuse its moral authority by giving official school approval to a behavior that many people (59% in a 1997 Gallup Poll), as a matter of conscience, believe to be morally wrong.

4. *The origins of sexual orientation are uncertain.* Many students think there is a “gene” that “causes” a person to have a particular sexual orientation. Schools can correct this misconception by teaching the scientific truth: Research reveals no consensus on the factors influencing sexual orientation. In their article “Human Sexual Orientation: The Biological Theories Re-appraised,” published in the March 1993 *Archives of General Psychiatry*, Columbia University researchers William Byne and Bruce Parsons reviewed 135 studies and concluded: “There is no evidence at present to substantiate a biological theory, just as there is no evidence to support any single psychological explanation.”

5. *Health education classes should promote abstinence for all students regardless of sexual orientation.* In deciding how to approach the issue of sexual orientation, schools must decide what to say in health class. The stakes are high. All students should learn that sexual intimacy outside a monogamous commitment is high-risk behavior regardless of who your partner is. They should know that, according to a 2001 National Institutes of Health report, condoms provide less than complete protection against HIV, the AIDS virus (87% protection if used correctly 100% of the time); some protection against gonorrhea for men; but no reliably proven protection against other STDs, including herpes, chlamydia, syphilis, and human papilloma virus (the cause of virtually all cervical cancer).

Students should know that according to the Centers for Disease Control, HIV can be transmitted to both heterosexual and homosexual males and females through oral sex, which is now on the rise as early as middle school. Human papilloma virus can also be transmitted through oral sex. Condoms are more likely to tear and fail during anal sex (compared to vaginal intercourse). And — what is at least as important — there is no condom for the heart.

6. *Providing help for students who believe they are homosexual or bisexual or are unsure of their orientation must be done in a way that does not put them at greater risk.* In a

study by Remafedi (1991) of 34,707 Minnesota teens, 25.9% of 12-year-olds said they were uncertain whether they were heterosexual or homosexual. (By adulthood, approximately 2% of the population self-identifies as homosexual according to the 1990 report of the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center.) Another study by Remafedi (1991) found, as have other researchers, a significantly higher risk of attempted suicide among teens who identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual. However, the data showed that for each year's delay in bisexual or homosexual self-labeling, the odds of a suicide attempt significantly diminished.

Students who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation clearly need appropriate counseling and the experiences of belonging (having friends, feeling a sense of community in the classroom and school, participating in extra-curricular activities, etc.) that all students need. But some schools, perhaps with the best of intentions, have taken further steps such as forming "gay/straight student alliances" (that often encourage students to "come out" and "live the truth about themselves"), establishing gay student clubs, and connecting students to gay community organizations. In the light of the above data, it is reasonable to ask whether such actions may in fact put students at greater risk—by leading them to prematurely (and perhaps erroneously) identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual.

In their 1995 *Handbook of Child and Adolescent Sexual Problems*, psychiatrists Michael Lundy and George Rekers point to another danger: Once an adolescent male identifies himself as gay, he is likely to initiate homosexual sexual activity that involves life-threatening health risks. Epidemiologists estimate that 30% of all 20-year-old sexually active homosexual males will be HIV-positive by the time they are 30. According to the Austin-based Medical Institute for Sexual Health, homosexually active males are also at significantly increased risk for other STDs, including hepatitis, gonorrhea, anal cancer, and gastrointestinal infections.

7. Finally, tolerance and diversity education should teach students that persons of conscience often disagree about public policies concerning sexual behavior, especially in cases where rights conflict. A person's sexual choices, whether heterosexual or homosexual, may collide with other people's rights and legitimate interests. Reasonable persons may differ as to how such conflicts should be resolved, but respect for conscience must always be taken into account.

For example, in California the state Supreme Court ruled in favor of a couple who, on grounds of religious conscience, refused to rent to an unmarried heterosexual couple that was cohabiting. The courts ruled that New York City could not compel a church to hire child-care workers who professed a sexual lifestyle that violated the church's teachings. Similarly, most religious denominations do not admit practicing homosexuals to the ordained ministry, just as those faiths that permit clergy to marry would not ordain a heterosexual who is sexually active outside marriage—for the reason that such individuals would not be able to serve as role models for the faith's teachings regarding sexual morality.

Consider a parallel case: the continuing, often acrimonious debate about the Boy Scouts' policy disqualifying professed homosexuals from leadership or membership. A woman in our community wrote a letter to the editor criticizing local schools and churches for

“supporting bigotry against homosexuals” by permitting Scouts to meet on their property. Is this a fair accusation? The Scouts’ policy, like the above-mentioned restrictions on religious ordination, is based on what the organization sees as a relevant moral standard. Others may disagree, but does it make sense to say, “I reserve the right to approve of homosexuality, and I insist you do, too, even if it violates your conscience to do so”?

Historically, respect for moral and religious conscience has been one of the distinguishing virtues of democratic societies. Totalitarian societies have no respect for conscience; their jails, as any Amnesty International report will document, are full of prisoners of conscience. And yet, in our discourse about diversity, the language of conscience is conspicuously absent.

Perhaps this is because to confront matters of moral and religious conscience is to bring our deepest differences to the fore. The sociologist James Hunter, director of the University of Virginia’s Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, observes: “For all the talk of multiculturalism and celebrating difference, ours is a society that is scared to death of difference.” In the quest for inclusiveness, Hunter says, we seek a “safe” morality and end up with a standard of tolerance and diversity that is, ironically, intolerant of the judgments of conscience.

What, then, are the moral imperatives facing tolerance and diversity education? At least two: First, to take every possible step to create a school environment that assures safety and respect for every person. Second, to take equal measures to foster respect for moral and religious conscience. For tolerance that does not respect conscience is not tolerance at all, and there can be no authentic diversity unless we honor the integrity of personal conscience.