

Tolerance keystone of democracy

It acknowledges difference and disagreement – but to co-exist despite them, write **Nuraan David and Yusef Waghid**

MORE and more educational leaders and managers at schools and universities are being confronted with various expressions of hate speech.

In Cape Town a group of high school boys compiled a song which included the lyrics: "I feel pain unearthly because of my hatred of k*****".

The word "k*****" is an apartheid-era racial slur and possibly the most offensive word in the South African lexicon. At the University of the Witwatersrand the phrase "kill a Jew" was spray-painted on a main building.

Similarly, in the US, racist flyers were found posted on the campus of Weber State University in Utah. The flyers were recruiting students to the white supremacist alt-right and declared "diversity is a code word for white genocide".

In May three Stellenbosch University students put up Nazi-inspired posters advertising an "Anglo-Afrikaner student" event under the motto "fight for Stellenbosch".

The incident caused a massive outcry and the university acted decisively to condemn the hate speech.

Incidents like these bring to the fore the question of how institutions of learning can and should be responding to such controversies, which lay bare our simmering intolerance of difference and "otherness".

In our latest book, *Tolerance and Dissent within Education: On Cultivating Debate and Understanding*, we look at how the concept of tolerance might be understood, cultivated and enacted in and through education.

One of the arguments we make is that schools and universities should deliberately widen the exposure of students and pupils to a diversity of people and views.

This will develop their capacities as democratic citizens and enhance the human quest for flourishing in social life.

What is tolerance? Andrew Murphy, a scholar at Rutgers University, describes tolerance as the self-restraint of not restricting or reducing the rights or autonomy of others, or other ways of being and acting.

But in a global context of heightened bigotry, some people see an appeal to tolerance as a defence of hate speech or racism.

This is not what tolerance is. All views and actions should only be tolerated to the extent that they don't harm others – physically, psychologically or emotionally.

Classical Greek philosopher Socrates said tolerance was about the pursuit of truth – being prepared to see the value of another person's perspective or truth.

Amy Gutmann of the University of Pennsylvania describes tolerance as agreeing to disagree about beliefs and practices that are a matter of basic liberty.

Simply put, tolerance is the choice to "agree to disagree" because we respect each other as moral and civic equals.

Whenever diverse communities of people come together there is the potential for peaceful co-existence as well as for conflict. If we were to all agree on what to think or how to act the need for



A tolerance wall created by American Boy Scout Ryan Andresen who faced years of abuse because he was gay. The writers say that teaching tolerance is the foundation of any democracy. PICTURE: REUTERS

tolerance would disappear.

But we don't.

So exercising tolerance is an acknowledgement of difference and disagreement – and, at the same time, a decision to co-exist despite these differences, rather than destroy them or each other.

This is fundamental to democracy, which is about equality and the right of people to believe what they believe.

Tolerance is the tool that helps us democratically manage the dynamics of any plural community or society.

But the value of tolerance goes beyond that. In protecting and cultivating diversity, tolerance also creates the conditions for human flourishing. Disagreement and dissent can be seen as processes of "mutual incitement". When people disagree, they are in fact inciting each other to think anew and differently about established ideas or beliefs. It is through disagreement that we dislodge ourselves from rigid

ways of thinking and being – and refine our ideas and positions.

Schools and universities must ensure that students and pupils are exposed to multiple perspectives and ways of doing things.

They have to encounter different viewpoints and arguments, and especially those that disrupt their own ways of thinking and their ideas of the world.

Critical to any educative endeavour is an understanding that there is always the possibility of another perspective and, hence, disagreement. If educational institutions can protect pupils from hate speech, while also successfully teaching them this, they will prepare them to become both better democratic citizens and richer people. – The Conversation

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