



# The importance of tolerance

## OPINION

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**M**ORE and more, educational leaders and managers in schools and universities are being confronted with various expressions of hate speech. Such incidents 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 widen the exposure of students and pupils to a diversity of people and views. This would develop their capacities as democratic citizens and enhance the human quest for flourishing in everyday life.

Andrew Murphy, a scholar from 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.

According to the classical Greek philosopher Socrates, tolerance is about the pursuit of truth. It is about being prepared to see the value of another person's perspective or truth. This necessarily means humbling oneself and acknowledging one's own limitations and fallibility. Tolerance, then, is fundamentally about equality; about recognising the capacity for both moral truth and error in ourselves and others.

Amy Gutmann from the University of Pennsylvania describes tolerance as "agreeing to disagree about beliefs and practices that are a matter of basic liberty". This, she argues, is a way to ensure the larger civic participation of people who are recognised as equals by their fellow citizens. Simply put, tolerance is the choice to "agree to disagree" because we respect each other as equals.

Whenever diverse communities of people come together there is the potential for peaceful coexistence as well as for conflict. If we were to all agree on what to think or how to act the need for 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. Agreement or consensus may be a desired end, if only to resolve conflict, but it is not a democratic imperative. 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 make sure that students and pupils are exposed to multiple perspectives and ways of doing things. They have to encounter different viewpoints and arguments, especially those that disrupt their own ways of thinking and ideas of the world.

It is important that the teacher's world view isn't the only one propagated in the classroom. This means teaching in a way that pupils or students are invited to bring their own identities and equal intelligence to the conversation. They must be encouraged to engage in deliberation and debate, with mutual respect. 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 teaching them this, they will prepare them to become both better democratic citizens and richer people. — *The Conversation*.  
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