Tolerance – a Key concept for dealing with cultural and religious diversity in education

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Cultural and religious diversity has for a long time been a matter of lived reality in European societies and their educational systems. Dealing with this diversity has not always implied shaping and developing attitudes of tolerance, respect and understanding towards others, as examples from European history show. We also find traditions of conflict, division and segregation between people of different cultural and religious backgrounds, partly rooted in the development of nation states in Europe and partly rooted in the colonial role of such states. As long as traditions and practices of intolerance and social exclusion are not counteracted, social cohesion in society is endangered. Tolerance is widely regarded as an indispensable commonly shared value for assuring the cohesion of plural societies. The field of education is crucial if future generations are to develop strategies for living together in a context of religious and cultural diversity, where attitudes of tolerance, respect, openness and readiness to learn from difference are honoured.

Also on a global level, it has become clearer that religion is an influential resource in peoples' lives, and also is seen to shape the actions of groups in society. This was very recently confirmed by a high-level meeting of the United Nations in November 2008 on the culture of peace, emphasizing the immense significance of interfaith dialogue based on principles such as tolerance and dignity. There is also a strong impetus, derived from inter-governmental bodies such as the UN, the Council of Europe, the EC and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), for European states to initiate policies introducing 'teaching about religions (and beliefs)' in European schools, so as to increase tolerance of difference and to contribute to social or community cohesion. Therefore, education for tolerance must take sufficient account of the role of religion.

Education for tolerance is increasingly concentrated in formal education, however it is also noticeable in the public domain where education for tolerance is part of a range of informal education initiatives. Amongst others there are, for example, religious, humanitarian, and other community based organisations and action groups addressing these issues as an integral part of their work. Both in formal and informal education, teaching for tolerance is associated with concepts such as citizenship education, peace education, human rights education, intercultural dialogue and interreligious learning. Further research has to be done to study their possible contribution to civic tolerance. It is necessary to investigate which concepts related to tolerance underlie different pedagogical approaches and under which conditions and presuppositions they most successfully function in practice.

Normative conflicts and the concept of tolerance

The notion of tolerance is in itself manifold and conflictive. Examples in history as well as recent cases show that the call for tolerance arises in conflicts, but it is not always clear which conception of tolerance is being advocated. The Western understanding of tolerance has also changed over the past few centuries, parallel to an increasingly pluralisation in these societies. An important reference in this field is the historical and systematic reconstruction of the term developed by the social philosopher Rainer Forst (2003). Forst distinguishes two overall perspectives in the discourse about tolerance: a so-called vertical perspective of state policy and the so-called *horizontal perspective* of intersubjectivity.

A sustainable concept of tolerance includes aspects both of denial and of affirmation with

regard to the values and practices of others. The concept also incorporates a component of *practical rejection*. Without this negation of positions in a normative sense it is not justified to speak of tolerance. Forst further distinguishes four conceptions of tolerance that concurrently exist in societies and may cause conflicting discussions:

- The *concept of permission* implies that the majority allows a minority to live according to its conviction as long as the supremacy of the majority is not questioned.

- The *concept of coexistence* uses tolerance as mean to avoid conflicts and to pursue the own interests of groups.

- The *concept of respect* presupposes mutual acknowledgement between individuals and groups.

- The *concept of appreciation* is the most challenging one because the others are not only respected but also appreciated in ethical terms. Their way of life is regarded as a valuable contribution to good life in society.

The social philosopher Jürgen Habermas has recently focused on the relevance of religious tolerance for the promotion of cultural rights. Habermas depicted religious tolerance as a pacemaker for an adequate understanding of multiculturalism and of the equitable coexistence of different cultural forms of life within a democratic community. This emphasis on religious tolerance for democratic citizenship can enhance the concept of tolerance by linking general tolerance to the realm of religious diversity in society.

In this sense, tolerance with focus on religion suggests the need for people of all faiths to develop the ability, at very least, to endure the fact that others may believe and live differently within their particular society, or in the wider world, although they might share some core values. In addition to being an individual attitude, tolerance can be a guiding principle for state relations regarding religion or belief, referring to the need for the state to accept the existence of a variety of religious traditions and convictions. Tolerance can thus – in both senses – be seen as a *minimum* standard or precondition for peaceful co-existence in multi-cultural and multi-religious societies.

Against the background of these theoretical distinctions it is possible to investigate educational practice, both in empirical and in conceptual terms. From the vertical perspective, educational policies in history and within differing contemporary concepts of tolerance can be studied and related to those understandings of tolerance which emerge from the horizontal perspective of inter-subjective educational practice. It can be anticipated that such investigation will be a fruitful enterprise because there seems to be little communication between the different spheres of research, policy and practice, as is shown by the Norwegian researcher Geir Afdal.

However, in order to trace educational practice with regard to questions of tolerance and to analyze different conceptualizations of tolerance, it is essential to operate with a wide understanding of tolerance at the outset. Tolerance, in its broadest sense, can be understood as

"accepting difference" (Afdal 2006). Tolerance is constituted by two conditions: first, there has to be a situation of difference or plurality, and second, there has to be some reason for passively or actively accepting (even appreciating) this situation of difference. Taking a wider conceptual scope of tolerance it is possible to analyse the understanding of difference or plurality that constitutes the numerous situations of tolerance, and the numerous different theories and reasons for accepting (or not accepting) this diversity. In this way one can also gain a more precise understanding of the "intolerable", that is, the proper limits of tolerance. Such knowledge will be very valuable for politicians and educators in the development of future tolerance education.

Education for tolerance

Tolerance is not only seen as a political or legal requirement but also as an educational one. It would be simplistic to expect education only to transmit knowledge about tolerance to subsequent generations. Learning is rather seen as a complex process of meaning making through *interaction* (bringing together previous and new knowledge, experiences, action and interaction in-between teachers and learners). Following this line of thought, school is seen as a venue for fostering values necessary for living good lives, and for nurturing democratic citizens in plural societies. Even if the research in the field is hitherto limited, it seems to indicate that in general education increases tolerance. Looking at results of the EU funded project FP 6 project *Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries (REDCo)* there is also empirical evidence that pupils regard school as an important place for learning tolerance. One of the main findings is that pupils from eight European countries are in general convinced of the fact that the more people know about each other, the better they are qualified to live together and respect each other's 'otherness'. REDCo-research has hinted at the fact that young people in Europe in general appreciate school as a venue to learn about religious and cultural diversity. This does not necessarily mean that they actually act tolerantly or experience tolerance in their everyday life, especially in the school context. The results also touch upon the issue of prejudice and division lines between groups. Outside school, the segregation of social and religious groups seems to prevail. However, as research is hitherto quite limited in this area there is an urgent need to investigate the relation between education in school and informal education in lifeworld ouside school.

To cover this the term *education for tolerance* should be used in a quite open and rather descriptive sense so as to avoid any normative restriction of the research field at stake. In a weak normative definition of the term the minimum criterion is that education for tolerance is meant to challenge cultural and religious stereotypes. It seeks to show cultural and religious diversity as a matter of fact and is directed towards the acceptance of those who are denied because of their beliefs or way of life. In a strong normative sense it is justified to speak of 'Tolerance Education', which is opposed to identity politics and concerns itself with translating the "lofty ideals of tolerance, respect and recognition into transformative practice".

As currently understood, tolerance, respect and recognition in relation to religion or belief, do not imply indifference, relativism or syncretism. Indeed, an education which requires

knowledge and understanding of different religions, and of people who adhere to those traditions, requires pedagogical approaches that represent religious traditions fairly and accurately – including their diversity – and enables students to engage with the content of what they have studied at a personal level. One can raise the hypothesis that if these conditions are fulfilled, then students will not only have some understanding; they will also be in a position to formulate viewpoints relating tolerance, respect and recognition.

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