In recent years, schools have given an increasing amount of attention to issues surrounding diversity and tolerance. Character education courses, multicultural material, and even health curricula weave the theme of tolerance through their lessons.

Incidents such as the murder of Matthew Shepard because he was gay, or the brutal killing of James Byrd because he was African American, or the attacks on synagogues and churches shock us into the reality that hate-motivated crime is still alive in America.

While some people use these tragedies to create the appearance of a crisis largely for political reasons, it must be pointed out that incidents of hate crimes are relatively rare. For example, incidents of hate crimes in 2001 (the latest figures) were only 0.082 percent of all crimes (including intimidation -- causing reasonable fear of bodily harm though none occurs - which accounted for 40.6% of hate crimes). Known offenders made up only 0.0032 percent of the population.

According to the FBI, hate crimes committed on campuses (they group schools and colleges together) totaled 833 in 2001. This amounts to 0.001 percent when compared to the estimated enrollment of 68 million students that year. (Of course, the rarity of the occurrences is little consolation to the 833 victims that year.)

Clearly, we are not a nation of bigots and haters though the spotlight put on certain incidents might make it appear that way. The need for tolerance is not because of an epidemic of hate crimes, but because of the much more mundane and daily social interactions that require treating each other with respect and dignity. It is in these interactions where educators deal with intolerance most frequently: hallway insults, angry outbursts, and smug dismissals of others’ viewpoints during class discussions.

Not only do educators deal with these types of social interactions among students, they, too, are tested in their tolerance for student clothing, hair styles, body piercing, attitudes, morals, and behaviors.

Defining Tolerance

When some use the word tolerance, they mean the first definition you find in the dictionary: recognition of and respect for the opinions, practices, or behavior of others. However, it is important to understand that respect here means, not veneration, but the avoidance of interference. Without this clarification, the definition of tolerance comes to be viewed as a gushing acceptance of just about everything someone says or does. Some even go so far as to define tolerance as the embracing and celebration of the opinions, practices, or behaviors of others.

Many educators and parents, however, cringe at the moral relativism of this approach. Yet, they feel boxed in by the current talk of tolerance. If they oppose it, they run the risk of being accused of advocating bigotry, intolerance, and even hate. This is because those promoting the most open-ended view of tolerance have staked out the playing field by defining the terminology. Pressure then gets placed on colleagues and students to adopt this view of tolerance. To resist is to appear intolerant.

Tolerance Requires Virtue

Tolerance, in and of itself, is not a virtue. If a student tolerates drinking and driving, his tolerance is not virtuous. Tolerance is neutral. Tolerance derives its value from what it is the student tolerates, and the manner in which the
student expresses his tolerance and intolerance. This involves character.

When a student uses a racial slur, his problem is not a lack of tolerance, but a lack of kindness and a problem with pride (the root of belief in racial superiority). When a student makes fun of a classmate's point of view during a class discussion, his problem isn't a lack of tolerance, but a lack of courtesy. When one student spits on another student because he thinks his schoolmate is gay, tolerance isn't the issue so much as is self-control.

Proper tolerance is the outgrowth of moral character qualities such as kindness, patience, courtesy, humility, love, self-control, and courage. Even intolerance should be expressed through these qualities.

Students need to be taught that tolerance arises from character. If they don't understand this, they will think they are being tolerant when they are actually only expressing indifference ("whatever"), or apathy ("who cares?"), or even recklessness ("why not?"). Improperly taught, "tolerance education" can lead to disarming students of their proper convictions.

Tolerance Requires Standards

The view that tolerance means, "accepting everyone's ideas and behaviors" is impractical in the real world. It sounds nice in classroom discussions and school board declarations, but it won't work in the hallways. You will find a more practical definition of tolerance in the dictionary's second definition of the term: the allowable variation from a standard. For instance, an engineer might ask about the tolerance of a metal beam in a building during an earthquake. How far should it bend before serious structural damage is done?

This is the definition by which we most commonly live. We establish a standard of what we think is best (even if somewhat vague). We then establish an allowable variation from that standard (often more vague). Then we judge the ideas and actions of others based on what we've established. This is as it should be. To do otherwise is to invite social and moral anarchy. The problem for many people isn't intolerance; it is in not clearly defining their standards.

Even so, we establish standards in hundreds, even thousands, of categories. For example, our standard (ideal) for marriage may be two people who love each other deeply in a supportive and nurturing relationship. However, our allowable variation from the standard is a marriage filled with anger and disharmony. But, what goes beyond the allowable variation; what is intolerable, is spousal abuse.

Within the school setting, this definition of tolerance is applied in many places: dress codes (pants are allowed, but not hot pants), hallway conduct (conversation between boys and girls is allowed, but not sexual harassment), and classroom participation (students may not have to participate in discussions, but they can't fall asleep).

This practical definition is valuable for classroom instruction because it honors students' moral frameworks developed by their religious education and families. Rather than teach them that tolerance is best demonstrated by an absence of judgment, it teaches that tolerance requires making judgments: first, establishing a standard, and second, establishing the limits of the allowable variation.

If students aren't taught to clearly establish their standards and allowable variations, they will struggle with what to tolerate. In frustration, they may simply jump to the sophomoric view that they should just accept everything. This doesn't require hard thinking and yet has the appearance of taking the moral high ground.

Some may raise the concern that making judgments will only add to someone's existing prejudices. There are two reasons why this doesn't have to be. First, as we have seen, the reality is that this is the way tolerance really works, so the best course of action is to help students think deeply about their standards. Secondly, no matter what their standards are, they should act virtuously toward anyone who varies from those standards.

Ironically, educators can create more "tolerant" school climates by focusing not on tolerance, but on character.

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