

A New Generation of Understanding: The Need for Increased Tolerance Education in Public Schools

An Academy Dialogue Session

Jordan Alexander
Graduate Student
Master of Arts in Teaching

Missouri State University

Phone: (562) 400-9127
E-Mail: jordan79@missouristate.edu
Mailing Address: 3126 E. Valley Water Mill Rd. #4108
Springfield MO 65803

How do you see me? How do I see myself? This is a question that is asked every day by almost everyone as they attempt to make sense of their daily routine. We go about our lives usually oblivious to the social norms and ideas that exert pressure upon us almost every second. Every time we are faced with this question, the answer generally remains the same. At a certain stage of adulthood, we tend to become fixed, stationary people with only slight variances to who we are and how we behave. Can the same be said of the students whose daily task, even their most encompassing daily thought, may be to find the solution to this question? It stalks them in the hallways, in the classrooms, at soccer practice, at dance rehearsal. The truth of the matter is this question is at the heart of a struggle for every student as they attempt to construct their own personality from the backdrop of their environment. Social constructs such as race, gender, sexuality, culture, family structure, and a myriad of other influences constantly vie for their position of prominence in the mind of the young adolescent. It is during this period of development and identification of self that students are more susceptible than the average human being to such things as depression, self-doubt, alcohol and drug use, feelings of loneliness, and the countless other emotional strains that go along with trying to "fit in." This pressure to belong to the in crowd doesn't always end with the above described emotional distress. The pressure to act and behave as others do, the need to become a reflection of them, often results in the systematic development of prejudices that our culture tends to reward. Belittling a person based on their race, creed, sexual orientation, gender, socio-economic background and just about everything else you can think of establishes dominance in a society where the heterosexual anglo-saxon protestant male pulls the strings of

power and tells us every day who we can be. This removes the question of “Who am I?” and replaces it with a statement of “you are...,” a grave disservice to the next generation.

Yet how do we, as educators, presently or in the future, turn the tide against this exertion of authority that dictates our existence? The answer is, on the surface at least, very simple yet, once it begins to be explored, becomes both intricate and delicate, weaving a tapestry of knowledge and understanding. A clearly defined policy of tolerance within the classroom and the school at large can help to overcome some of the broader obstacles that students and faculty face in the world of education. In this work, I will be examining the state of education as it relates to the field of tolerance, taking into account academic challenges, social needs, and the expansion of the definition of the concept itself. I have been a student of this topic for most of my educational career and now have something to say regarding the need for it in our public schools and in our lives at large. Through this, we can begin to understand that the students placed in our care depend on us to bring to them the knowledge that they cannot receive on their own. We must show them examples they can identify with and thus guide them on the path to a deeper understanding and the answer to the question that plagues them.

In order to fully understand the topic of tolerance we must first examine the current attitudes that most people hold on the topic. We hear the word constantly in our schools and many even claim to be truly tolerant people, yet they seem to fall short when truly confronted with a cross-cultural dilemma. The concept of tolerance seems to be viewed more as a passive attitude toward differences. Statements that begin with “I’m not racist but...” or end with “as

long as it doesn't interfere with my life," are not the attitudes of a truly accepting individual yet it seems that this is often the best we can hope for. Ann Chinnery of the University of Saskatchewan, in her article "Cole Case: Reopening the File on Tolerance in Teaching and Learning Across Difference, defines tolerance thus. "In a nutshell, tolerance suggests having to put up with something (or some person or idea) that one would really rather not have to put up with. And while tolerance is obviously better than hatred or overt discrimination, it is, at best, a minimal virtue." (Chinnery, 2005) Unfortunately, this seems to be the attitude that pervades our culture on this issue of tolerance. It has even become a concept to which we are becoming de-sensitized.

As we walk to halls of a school, we see posters and signs that read "Zero Tolerance." While this is put in place to protect our students, it again sets up a concept that carries with it a negative connotation. In this regard, it is a more active concept, but paints an aggressive picture in the mind of the child; that tolerance is ever vigilant, something to be feared, there to get them in trouble when they slip up. The word, so heavily used in this context, is losing its most beautiful implication, that of acceptance of differences and the knowledge that we have more in common than not. We are content to teach the mandated units on diversity and spend the rest of our time blindly following expectations set up for us by Washington with little to no motivation to step beyond ourselves and bear witness to what goes on in the hallways right outside our classroom door. Racial slurs, insults like "faggot" echo down the corridors and seem to fall on deaf ears. Where is our policy of "zero tolerance" now? This passive attitude of pretending something doesn't exist simply because you either aren't willing or do not understand how to overcome it is a symptom of a larger illness in our school societies. In

“Standing Up for Diversity: Lesbian Mothers’ Suggestions for Teachers,” when asked what the most negative qualities in a teacher were, they”...also objected to teachers who verbalize anti-gay sentiments and adhere to strict gender norms (for example, boys play sports and girls play house.) Above all, lesbian mothers criticized teachers who allow bullying and teasing or fail to intervene when these incidents occur.” (Bower, 2008) We may, as educators, be tempted to look the other way, but rest assured that when we do, it doesn’t end there. These children carry this baggage with them as they converse with parents and friends and the problem continues to increase.

The quest for tolerance is ongoing and difficult and must be constantly reflected upon. Tolerance is more than an attitude, it should be a state of being, a frame of mind. It should be actively pursued and confronted in an attempt to break down the barriers that our people seem to be so good at shoring up. But why is it so important? What is the big deal if we do not become aware of the growing diversity in our schools and towns? The answer is simple. By allowing attitudes of racism, prejudice, and discrimination to perpetuate, we are gambling with our student’s future. The child that feels slighted today may not return tomorrow. Don’t we owe it to them to not let them slip away without a fight?

Those students of color, of a different orientation, of a gender that is not given its fair share of opportunity, they are the ones who so desperately need to find their voice. Where better than at school? “Schools are an ideal place for students to grapple with and explore their racial identities.” (Davis, 2007) School society is, by and large, a reflection of actual society. Learning is a social activity and students are social creatures who are willing to trade

their identity on the school market for the valued commodity of “popularity.” It becomes a constant struggle to instill in them a sense of self that is so enticing to them that they would not trade it for anything their peers have to offer.

The social norms at play here are, more or less, preparation for what is to come. If we as educators fail to equip these students with what they need to succeed, then we should hang up our bell and go home. “From the current terrorist activities, racial conflicts, and gender differences to schoolyard bullies, most of them arise because of misunderstandings and intolerance of differences and diversities among people. Thus, our global community in general and educators in particular are faced with the task of preparing the youngsters to live in today’s diverse global community with each other harmoniously, successfully, and productively.” (Wan, 2006) The face of public school is changing and they will need our guidance if they are to grip triumph in their hands.

According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Website, the percentage of students of color is grown steadily since 2003. The largest increase is in Hispanic students who have grown in size from 2.3% of the student population in 2003 to 3.4% of the population in 2007. Asian students have grown steadily at a .1% increase yearly within that time. In fact, while the Caucasian student population has decreased 2%, all the other students of a different ethnic background have shown an increase. (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2007) These students come to our schools hungry to learn about themselves and, probably more often than any of us would care to admit, their pleas fall upon deaf ears. Already, according to educational testing services, by 2015 white

students will become the minority in the District of Columbia, California, Hawaii, and New Mexico. (Carnevale, 2000) We must be equipped to deal with their needs so that they and we can grow together.

As educators, there can be no question that we attempt to enact a curriculum of diversity in our classroom but are we truly succeeding? We must remain vigilant in order to create a curriculum addressing as much diversity as we can. If we are to do this, we must embrace the various backgrounds of our students and make sure that we are acknowledging their differences while simultaneously guiding them in their understanding. It is human nature to see differences in people. By denying that we all come with some kind of social baggage relating to someone different from ourselves is to be naïve and wholly unequipped to face the challenges ahead. We have often heard of the need to be “colorblind” in our views of the world. That is, on the one hand, impossible to achieve completely and, on the other, to draw attention away from the true issue. In order to teach tolerance in a diverse classroom, we must first acknowledge that diversity and view it as a constant influence, shaping our path toward education. It is not racist to see difference, but it is so to actively encourage ignorance on the topic and to foster inappropriate attitudes towards it. This is one problem that will not go away by being ignored. “Colorblind discourse asserts that any consideration of race is itself racist. It protects racism by making it invisible.” (Kandaswamy, 2007) We must not view race as something that doesn’t exist, but view it as an opportunity to enrich our curriculum and to challenge ourselves and our classroom to look beyond a construct that is disagreeable. In this way, we can teach them to think critically and to analyze any abstract thought or principle they may deem unworthy of continuance.

In “Beyond Colorblindness and Multiculturalism: Rethinking Anti-Racist Pedagogy in the University Classroom,” Priya Kandaswamy has an interesting metaphor which explains how the predominant white male paradigm can influence subconscious racist behaviors. When she teaches classes about people of color “... white students frequently say that they see the course as an opportunity to enrich themselves by learning about different cultures, as a vehicle toward their own personal growth.” (Kandaswamy, 2007) While this may seem like a noble goal in the scheme of things, we must take a critical look at the underlying attitude motivating this desire. “Statements like these indicate that white students often view classes about the experiences of people of color as a kind of tourist experience rather than as a place for serious critical inquiry. (This metaphor is particularly apropos, as tourism, while ostensibly about the places and people being seen, is actually about producing a positive experience for the tourist.” (Kandaswamy, 2007) While it may be easy to dismiss this metaphor as the exception to the rule, we should be constantly examining our views towards all kinds of prejudices to ensure that we do not become “social tourists.” When faced with these kinds of questions do we centralize and see them as a reflection of us or do we attempt to de-centralize and see “the other” as a distinct thing. Something to be studied, accepted, protected, and welcomed.

Part of embracing diversity is an understanding of the diversity within. This means that we can no longer view the racial makeup of individuals as our parents did: black, white, Hispanic, Asian, and so forth. This is simply not specific enough. We must acknowledge that there is difference even among those larger racial umbrellas. It is often easy to lose sight of the fact that “Asian” can be any number of things such as Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian, Malaysian, and any other number of individuals who identify with this group. Hispanics can be

Colombian, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and a multitude of others. There is some sameness within that group (Hispanics for example predominantly speak different dialects of Spanish and many of them have religious beliefs leaning toward Catholicism) others do not. Asians speak entirely different languages and have distinct religions based on anything from family practices to geographical location. In addition, I think no one would disagree that an African-American born within the United States and an African-American born in Africa often exhibit extremely different patterns of behaviors and adhere to dissimilar social norms.

The diversity within these groups doesn't stop with language or religion. "The Hispanic group is also socioeconomically diverse...Like Hispanics, Asians also come from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds....Each subgroup has its own distinct language and a variety of religions." (Zhou, 2003) Socio-economic status crosses all boundaries and all color lines. It plagues so many American families that it has become a category all its own. It doesn't just affect people of color, or women, but all people can fall victim to it. In many parts of Missouri, students suffer from generational poverty where they have seen their parents and grandparents struggle under the crippling yoke of mounting debt and fewer options in the workplace. This often leads to feelings of hopelessness that drives students away from school and into the same cycle in which their progenitors suffered. These kinds of oppressive conditions also call for us to combat them in the classroom. It falls to us to give them the skills they require to escape the spiral of economic repression. "The issue we should be concerned with is not whether children are able to advance beyond their parents' status – many of them have parents who are insufficiently educated and are struggling at society's bottom – but whether they can move up to and secure a position within the ranks of the American middle

class. In today's society, where the social mobility ladder is missing several rungs in the middle, children have to do well in school to succeed in the future labor market where both the demand for advanced training and the prospect of upward mobility are high, or they will become trapped in permanent poverty." (Zhou, 2003) Economic background is inextricably linked to success in school and drop-out rate, especially among students of color. Those students who do not graduate are less likely to pursue a college career and they quickly fall by the wayside as their self-fulfilling prophecy of worthlessness comes true. It is up to us to take all this into account and to counteract this sense of worthlessness whenever it is encountered. The American Psychological Association states that "...the suicide rates for teens and young adults have been increasing dramatically in the past 20 years, and certain ethnic groups are at a particularly high risk." (The American Psychological Association, 2001) If nothing is done, these number will continue to increase, thus robbing us of the brilliant minds of the next generation for no reason other than, we didn't care enough.

In addition to such things as gender, ethnicity, and economic background, there is a newer need to address tolerance daily in the classroom. There is a group that has emerged as one of the most at risk groups that roam our halls, yet continue to be, at best, ignored when the selection of classroom materials is chosen and, at worst, met with aggression and hatred in the face of political and religious conservatism in schools. I am speaking, of course, about our young gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered, and questioning students. Now, more than ever, their struggle must be brought to light in order to promote acceptance and peace for them both outside and within. This a group that is largely misunderstood and actively persecuted within our schools and their rights to a free and appropriate public education based upon

meritocracy and intellectual freedom are constantly impinged upon by fellow students and, in some extreme cases, faculty members.

As we roam the halls of our schools and even open our ears within a classroom, there is more than likely a chance that we will hear the phrase “that’s gay” or the word “faggot” used by a vast majority of students with little more compunction than asking someone what they did over the weekend. This type of blatant harassment has been shown to promote bigotry and prejudice about GLBTQ students, no matter how innocently the gibe may have been intended. Often it falls to the educator in the classroom to either mediate this inappropriate use of intolerant language or, as probably happens more often than anyone would care to admit, ignore it. When the comment is ignored, then the behavior is allowed to continue unchecked. We may see little harm in this, but we have no way of knowing how the one student in the corner who is unsure as to his sexual identity is affected throughout the course of his life. If it happens once or twice, the student probably is not affected in the extreme. But when this hate speech is allowed to grow, thrive, and multiply at the alarming rate that it has in the past, it may do irrevocable damage to that student across time. Damage that may not be reversible once it is done. “Nearly ten percent of American youths say they are chronically abused by their peers, according to several surveys. Bullying strikes gay teens the hardest and they are four times as likely as other teenagers to commit suicide.” (Baldauf, 1997) This is a trend that began almost as quickly as the issue came to the forefront and continues today. GLBTQ students often feel isolated, alone, and without any support structure. If they are not getting the support they need from family and friends, then we at least owe it to them to make school a safe environment that promotes positive self images and helps them to feel less cut off from

their community. Students across the country are coming to grips with their sexuality earlier and earlier and they will need guidance if they are to accept all that that entails. For our heterosexual students, it requires us to foster in them a respect and understanding for their fellow human beings and for our GLBTQ students that means giving them a safe environment in which to explore what being homosexual means free from ridicule and derision and the threat of violence. Research suggests that it is those students who have not yet come to grips with their sexuality that may be most at risk if the question of tolerance is not dealt with in our schools. In "Homophobic Teasing, Psychological Outcomes, and Sexual Orientation among High School Students: What influence Do Parents and Schools Have?" The authors examine the effects of gay teasing and bullying on the behavior of students who identified themselves as heterosexual, questioning, or GLBT. Their studies show the greatest amount of damage was inflicted upon those students who were unsure about their sexual identity. This study found that depression and suicide ideation among questioning students was, in some cases, close to or, in most cases, higher than that of the GLBT peers. Destructive behavior among questioning students such as Alcohol and Marijuana use was 1.5 times to double the amount of their GLBT peers in situations where gay teasing was a commonplace occurrence. These students were also much more likely to view school in a negative light than their peers in both of the other groups. When viewing such figures as this, it becomes clear that these students require an even more pro-active guiding hand than other GLBT students. They must be offered strong, solid examples of homosexuality free of prejudice in order to see both sides of who they are. Sexual identity is not as easy for some to acknowledge as others, and while these students are attempting to figure out one of the most important factors in their lives, we as a system of

education are losing them. If they are not given the support necessary to deal with this state of complexity, they are more likely to exhibit behavior that they could have easily avoided.

For these students, it is also important that we resist the urge to pigeon-hole them immediately as well. We as human beings are comfortable with labels, if we can name it, then we can define it. But questioning students are just that, questioning. They have not developed their sense of self in sexual terms, and therefore must not have homosexual authors produced as a way to get them to “come out.” These students need a delicate hand that ensures them that all paths they could walk will be accepted as long as they lead happy, productive lives. Assumption is one of their greatest enemies. So is it for all GLBTQ students and must be summarily dismissed in a curriculum of active tolerance. We cannot assume that any one student is anyone way, nor can we assume that that way is concretized for life. Sexuality, especially in the cases of these questioning students, can often be fluid and dynamic. They may decide one thing one day only to change that opinion the next. The important thing is that they be allowed to take the time they need with the support they require. It is already a problem that heterosexuality is assumed from birth, thus making the realization of an alternate sexual identity that much harder to attain. GLBT students are then heterosexualized until the time when they are sufficiently self-aware, self-possessed, and courageous enough to break with traditions, making a supreme choice for their own happiness. Sadly, due to prejudices and intolerance that becomes deeply seeded within them, most never do. Yet how can we begin to create a world in which this narrow-mindedness can be done away with? The answer is already in front of us.

There is a rich mine of authors and texts that can be utilized in our classrooms to depict talented homosexual artists in a positive light. Everything from Sappho to Walt Whitman to Oscar Wilde is already accessible in the classroom, yet do we engage the material as the work of a homosexual author and all that that entails? Or do we analyze it for poetic structure, theme, and the like and briefly glance over one of the major details that may clue our students in to the state of mind and philosophical approaches of the author? If we do the latter, we are cheating our GLBTQ students out of learning about their place in history and the other students in our class of the chance to learn about something that may lie outside of their current sphere of knowledge, namely, how does “the other” think? “Given that the institutional framework of high school ELA consciously and publicly silences certain sexualities, straight or “normal” students also suffer pedagogically. When the literature that tells LGBTQ stories is excluded from curricula, all students learn is that “those people” do nothing worth mentioning.” (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005) All students need “to discuss the awkward, the different, and the new so that all students get opportunities to learn about the range of gender and sexual identities that constitute everyone’s world.” (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005) Through discourse, there is understanding. We must engage students daily whether they agree or not and drive them toward creating more three-dimensional, informed opinions about these important and inflammatory subjects. To establish a set of core beliefs for themselves which are both educated and personal; in short, getting them to think for themselves.

In order to achieve this, we must actively engage in tolerance based curriculum at every opportunity. This can be approached through innumerable avenues limited only by the imagination of the teacher. Many teachers say that they do not have the time they would wish

to cover things like multiculturalism and queer theory and, they are probably right. There is many demands on the time of an educator today and they are forced to make sacrifices to keep administrators, parents, and legislators happy. Yet this is an important part of learning and requires a sufficient amount of time. Where time cannot be made, then the discussions surrounding things like gender, economics, and ethnicity must be worked into conversations where ever possible. If a story is read with a character of a different ethnicity, no matter how minor, the class may be encouraged to imagine events through that character's eyes. If a poem is discussed by a homosexual author, examine how that may have affected the writing or the author's motivations in writing it. These small discussions can open countless doors for students to grow and understand each other. More often than not, that seemingly brief discussion may mean the world to someone who is struggling to establish their identity.

For those teachers blessed with the time and funding to explore these themes in more depth, there is much research that has already been done to aid in the opening of minds. Dr. Guofang Wan of Ohio University recommends a thematic approach to the teaching of ethnicity and diversity in the classroom. This includes looking at the same story, in his example Cinderella, and examining many different re-tellings in many different cultures. The students would then be called upon to examine what the differences and similarities between the versions say about the particular culture in which it was written. (Wan, 2006) In "Teaching Queer-Inclusive English Language Arts, Mollie V. Blackburn and JF Buckley advocate a queer inclusive program that does not attempt to lump gay and lesbian authors together to be studied for their own sakes, but to use their texts to draw larger conclusions about how sexuality and the feeling of "otherness" can influence our daily lives. "Queer theorists recognize

sexual and gender identities as social, multiple, variable, shifting, and fluid; and while they allow for movement among such identity categories, the advocate for movement outside of them as well. (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005) They also encourage the use of texts that include positive and complex gay and lesbian characters that are thought provoking to students. The bottom line is, it doesn't matter how you engage the students on these topics, what matters is that you do and do so often and actively in the spirit of engendering an honest understanding and acceptance of "others."

In conclusion, we must all take up this cause in the spirit of forwarding the thinking of future generations. There is so much out there that we need to educate ourselves on before we can begin to educate others. The topics that have been discussed herein are but a taste of some of the things we need to be aware of as we proceed into the classroom. Such topics as gender, family structure, and many others that fall outside of the scope of this text must also be explored in the daily classroom regime. The world is quickly becoming one global network of all different peoples. The technology of the age has made it impossible for us to remain islands in a sea of vast diversity. We must ensure that all the students who need our aid receive it, and the majority of them need to be taught how to get along with one another. When an African-American student wakes up every morning, he is still African-American, unable to hide who he is to others. Do we deny that student the education they deserve simply for being who they are? When a gay or lesbian student goes to school every day, they may be able to hide who they are to their peers, but at what cost to their self-esteem? When that African-American student goes home, they may be able to garner support from their family who share their ethnicity but this is not a guarantee. Too often our GLBTQ students have no one either at home

or at school to look to for support. They are “alone.” Do we not owe it to them to give them the advantages they may lack otherwise in life? By passively accepting others for our own benefit, we deny those students without the self-awareness possible to make their own judgments the experience and expertise that we possess on this topic. In short, denying them our guidance which should be the reason we are in the classroom to begin with. We are not there to pretend as if the differences do not exist, but to acknowledge them and constantly strive to weaken and break down the societal walls that are built to keep us from understanding one another. This is what tolerance should entail for us.

All students, each and every one of them, is special in one way or another. They look to us to be the first to break down the barriers standing in their way. They all need us to be pillars of strength and wisdom and to live up to all the expectations placed upon us. This task is daunting enough without adding this idea of active tolerance into the mix. Yet add it we must or risk allowing these students who feel they have no identity to slip into a place where they may never be blessed with the opportunity to establish one. As we have grown, we have become solidified in who we are and how we behave. It is up to us now to behave in a positive way that will serve as an example to other who are struggling to learn how for themselves. Our identity that we struggled to attain in our lifetime was achieved through awareness and understanding of ourselves and others. It is now up to us to help someone else, through the window of that awareness to find their own.

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