



Making Sense of Tolerance and Diversity

Thomas Lickona, Director, Center for the 4th and 5th Rs

Tolerance has often been a controversial issue for schools. Why is this so? On the one hand, tolerance seems like a core human virtue, essential for democracy and civilized life. The absence of tolerance is at the root of much evil: peer cruelty, unjust discrimination, hate crimes, religious and political persecution, and terrorism.

But if tolerance is defined, as it often is, as “the ability to accept the values and beliefs of others,” it poses a dilemma: How can you ask people to “accept” all people’s values when they may believe that some of those values are wrong? How, for example, can you ask people on opposite sides of the abortion and homosexuality debates to “accept” the validity of each other’s views? Contradictory views cannot both be right.

Tolerance does not require us to accept other people's beliefs or behaviors. It does require us to respect every person's freedom of conscience.

All schools can embrace tolerance as an essential civilizing virtue—if they define it correctly. Tolerance as an ethical virtue does not require us to accept other people’s beliefs or behaviors. Tolerance *does* require us to respect every person’s human dignity and human rights, including freedom of conscience.

Freedom of conscience, however, is not absolute. It is the liberty to make personal moral choices as long as those choices do not infringe on the rights of others. As an old saying puts it, “Your freedom to swing your fist ends where my chin begins.” Our own freedom of conscience may lead us to object to some of the moral choices that other people make. We might even try to persuade them that they are mistaken in their beliefs or behavior. However, the virtue of tolerance would keep us from coercively and unjustly interfering with others’ freedom to make decisions about their own lives.

Tolerance enables us to disagree, even profoundly, about controversial issues such as abortion, stem cell research, homosexuality, condoms in schools, capital punishment, and the like. Tolerance enables us to

debate our deepest differences in a civil and non-violent manner—a debate that is necessary for the development of enlightened and just public policies and for progress in resolving contested moral issues.

Tolerance and Diversity

Some schools have replaced “tolerance” with what seems like a more positive virtue: “appreciation of diversity.” Students should in fact learn to value and when possible directly experience the richness of human diversity found within other races, religions, countries, and cultures. Appreciating diversity means trying to find the best in all people, just as we want them to find the best in us. The *Children’s Diversity Pledge* (box, p. 3), cooperative learning, and good multicultural literature are all ways of helping students learn about and affirm diversity in this ethical sense.

However, a problem with “diversity” as an ethical category is that it is all-inclusive, encompassing all differences. Suicide bombers are part of diversity. So are Ku Klux Klanners, internet hate sites, and cultures that oppress women. Some forms of diverse sexual behavior would meet with approval from some persons and disapproval from others. So if we’re educating students to “appreciate diversity,” we need to ask: What kind of diversity are we talking about?

Intellectual honesty requires us to acknowledge at least three kinds of diversity: (1) “*positive diversity*” (such as the different races, ethnic groups, and cultural strengths that make up our classrooms and communities); (2) “*negative diversity*” that we morally reject (such as belief systems that sanction hatred or abuse of human rights); and (3) “*controversial diversity*,” concerning matters about which people often do not agree (such as abortion and the proper relationship for sexual intimacy). “*Appreciating diversity*,” then, is an appropriate educational goal only with regard to category #1—diversity that we generally agree is positive or at least morally neutral. We obviously can’t ask people to “appreciate” values and behaviors that violate their conscience.

There are three kinds of diversity: positive, negative, and controversial.

In short, “appreciating diversity” can complement but

Children's Diversity Pledge

I believe that all kids are different and special in their own way.

I believe that all kids deserve to be loved and respected for who they are.

I will work on being a good friend, so that all children feel welcomed around me.

I will not judge people because of where they live, the color of their skin, how they dress, their abilities, their spiritual beliefs, or whether they are a girl or a boy.

I can and will find the good in all people.

I will not tell or listen to jokes that make fun of other people.

I will be a peacemaker in my family and school.

I will show pride in my family and heritage.

I will learn as much as I can about the family traditions of other kids in my school.

—Cultural Exchange Entertainment Corp.

should not replace “tolerance” on the list of character education virtues because some diversity is morally controversial. We need tolerance in order to address, with honesty and civility, that which divides us.

Tolerance and Sexual Orientation

Many of the most divisive issues in our culture fall into the sexual domain. Consider one that schools often struggle with: the issue of sexual orientation. One recent magazine article urged schools to “promote positive attitudes toward gay families, celebrate Gay Pride Week just as you do Black, Hispanic, and Women's History Months, and infuse famous gay people into your curriculum”—arguing that such steps are necessary in order to create “a welcoming school atmosphere for gay students and gay parents” and “an environment free of harassment, homophobia, and discrimination.” Is such advice educationally and ethically sound?

Matters of Truth and Fairness

Here are nine points—matters of truth and fairness, I believe—that can guide schools in their approach to the complex, controversial issue of sexual orientation.

1. Schools must teach students to respect all people and should not tolerate violence or harassment toward any student or staff member for any reason. All persons, regardless of sexual orientation, deserve to be treated with justice and respect. Slurs such as “fag” should not be permitted in the school environment any

more than we permit ethnic or racial slurs.

2. “Homophobia” is not a useful term in reasoned and respectful discussion of homosexuality. If this term were used only to mean “fear or hatred of homosexuals,” all persons of character would agree we should reject such irrational attitudes. But “homophobia” is often either not defined or used in a broad-brush way to refer to any disapproving judgment of homosexuality. It is clearly insulting to call other people “phobic” because their conscience leads them to make a particular moral judgment. Ethical discourse requires a language of respect.

3. The school can create a caring and welcoming community for all students and parents without affirming all the lifestyle choices that may be represented in its student and parent community. We can affirm all members of the school community by treating everyone with warmth and respect, nurturing the gifts of all students, and inviting all students and parents to contribute actively to the life of the school. The school cannot, however, legitimately treat a controversial sexual behavior as a “cultural category” comparable to race, ethnicity, or religion and then affirm that sexual category in the name of having an “anti-bias curriculum.” For the school to affirm a homosexual lifestyle is to abuse its moral authority by giving official school approval to a behavior that many people (59% in a 1997 Gallup Poll), as a matter of conscience, believe to be morally wrong.

4. The origins of sexual orientation are uncertain. Many students think there is a “gene” that “causes” a person to have a particular sexual orientation. Research, in fact, reveals no consensus on the factors influencing sexual orientation. In “Human Sexual Orientation: The Biological Theories Reappraised” (*Archives of General Psychiatry*, 50:3, March 1993), Columbia University researchers William Byne and Bruce Parsons review 135 studies and conclude: “There is no evidence at present to substantiate a biological theory, just as there is no evidence to support any single psychological explanation.”

5. Sexual orientation does not determine sexual behavior. A person’s sexual behavior is always a choice. For example, a great many persons, regardless of their sexual orientation, choose to abstain from sexual intimacy for moral, religious, or health reasons.

6. Health education classes should promote abstinence regardless of sexual orientation. Sexual intimacy outside a monogamous commitment is high-risk behavior regardless of who your partner is. Condoms provide no significant protection against the three leading STDs (herpes, chlamydia, and human papilloma virus) infect-

ing sexually active teens, inadequate protection against AIDS (in approximately 100 studies, the failure rate has ranged between 10 and 30%), and no protection against the mental, emotional, and character-damaging consequences of premature sexual involvement.

7. *The long-range welfare of students who are confused about their sexual identity may be best served by helping them delay self-labeling.* In a study by Gary Remafedi, M.D. (*Pediatrics*, 89:4, 1992) of 34,707 Minnesota teens, 25.9% of 12-year-olds said they were uncertain if they were heterosexual or homosexual. (By adulthood, only about 2% will self-identify as homosexual.) Another study by Remafedi (*Pediatrics*, 87:6, 1991) found a significantly higher risk of attempted suicide among teenagers who identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual. However, *"for each year's delay in bisexual or homosexual self-labeling, the odds of a suicide attempt diminished by 80%."* These data suggest that schools should avoid doing anything that would lead a young person to prematurely (and perhaps erroneously) self-label as homosexual or bisexual.

In their 1995 *Handbook of Child and Adolescent Sexual Problems*, psychiatrists M. Lundy and G. Rekers point to a second danger: Once an adolescent male identifies himself as gay, he is likely to initiate sexual activity that involves life-threatening health risks. Epidemiologists estimate that 30% of all 20-year-old sexually active homosexual males will be HIV-positive or dead of AIDS by the time they are 30.

8. *If a school treats the issue of sexual orientation in the curriculum, it should, while teaching tolerance as respect for persons, acknowledge that people differ in their conscience judgments in this area.* As a matter of intellectual honesty, the school must acknowledge the controversy regarding homosexual and bisexual behavior. Some people consider such behaviors morally acceptable, but others do not. Objections are often religiously grounded. For example, orthodox Catholic and Protestant Christians, Muslims, and orthodox Jews believe (though individual members of these faith traditions sometimes dissent from their religion's historical teaching) that sexual intimacy is reserved by God for a husband and wife in marriage. In this view, the two purposes of sex—the expression of faithful, committed love in a complementary union and the procreation of new life issuing from that union—can be fulfilled only in heterosexual marriage. By this standard, *all* forms of sex outside heterosexual marriage are considered wrong.

This is not a "prejudice" or "phobia" but a deep belief about the purposes of sex. Again, it is neither respectful nor just to denigrate this conscience-based conviction by labeling it "homophobic" or "heterosexist" and then treating it as if it were the moral equivalent of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism. Conscience-based judgments about homosexual and bisexual sex are judgments about the rightness of certain sexual behaviors, not judgments about the worth or dignity of persons.

9. *The school should teach that while rational people agree on the inalienable human rights belonging to all persons, they debate what civil rights should be extended to particular groups.* *Human rights*—such as the right to life and freedom of expression—belong to every person by virtue of being human; the government does not "create" these rights and may not take them away. By contrast, *civil rights*—such as the right to marry or adopt children—are granted at society's discretion on the basis of what the Constitution requires and judgments of what serves the common good.

ot surprisingly, because of differing conscience convictions about sexual behavior, civil rights in this area have been a matter of public policy debate and varying judicial decisions. In some cases, the courts have found in favor of gays' and lesbians' claims to civil rights such as equal employment opportunity, entitlement to equal job benefits for couples living together, the right to adopt children, and the like. In other cases, the courts have ruled differently, deciding, for example, that a landlord, on grounds of religious conscience, does not have to rent to unmarried couples, and that the Boy Scouts, on grounds of its moral code, does

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not have to admit leaders or members who publicly oppose that code. The courts ruled that New York City could not compel the Catholic archdiocese of New York to hire child-care workers who professed a sexual lifestyle that violated Church teachings. And so on. Tolerance must include respect for moral and religious conscience, or it is not tolerance at all. ■

Dr. Thomas Lickona is a developmental psychologist, professor of education at SUNY Cortland, and author of several books on character development including Educating for Character and Raising Good Children.

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