

Teaching Tolerance in School Education

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■ ABSTRACT ■

Tolerance education must be based on the fact that *tolerance* like *democracy* cannot be achieved once and for all. Students must learn to constantly watch political and cultural processes for negative developments. Tolerance for others' values and behaviour can be learnt by studying previous historiographical views. The basic attitude to be learnt is respect for other cultures - within one's own culture as well as foreign cultures.

Key Words

tolerance education, democracy, cultural relativism, multiperspectivity, the study of history, "uri", respect

For an excellent introduction to the topic I want to refer to K. Peter Fritzsche *Tolerance and Tolerance Education – An Introduction* published by the *Institut fuer Friedenspaedagogik[Peace Education Institute]*, Tuebingen/Gernay, which can easily be found in the internet.

I will summarize and rephrase without further acknowledgement some of the contents of this article, and then will add some remarks based on my experience as a student of Korean culture, and of cultural studies

in general, for more than 40 years.

At the beginning of this article, the author points out that the general understanding of the term *tolerance* reveals different kinds of tolerance:

1. the *pragmatic calculating* tolerance (Social and economic advantages and benefits gained out of practicing tolerance seemed to be higher than the costs of intolerance - hate, violence and victims flourish and proliferate..)
2. the *rights based* tolerance (Every person must be granted the freedom of being different, for it is a human right. And it is people's task to tolerate the outcome of the others' freedom.)
3. the *active interfering* tolerance (The concept of positive tolerance as understood by UNESCO. Tolerance is more than the mere absence of intolerance. It implies our involvement in creating an environment in which tolerance is possible.)

This progression of the different kinds of tolerance also parallels the historic development of the concept of *tolerance*. As can be seen, *tolerance* is not a concept defined once and for all, but just like the concept of *democracy*, needs constant revision.

Following from this observation it must be stressed in education that both concepts are relative, and we can never achieve a final state of tolerance or of democracy. Rather, the student must learn an attitude of constant willingness to scrutinize his own - and his society's - level of tolerance.

In Fritzsche's words:

"Tolerance matters for the individual and for the society. Tolerance is, therefore, never an end in itself but a powerful means towards a number of important ends, such as:

- conflict resolution and the making of peace;
- the promotion of democracy;
- the development of wealth; and,
- the formation of an international reputation for tolerance."

A world without intolerance is an abstract utopia; a world without circumstances provoking intolerance seems to be impossible. However, there are numerous ways of reducing intolerance and promoting tolerance. Tolerance as a competence of citizens should not just be requested, tolerance has to be learned like all other elements of culture.

Tolerance education

Most programmes and initiatives for tolerance education are based on the assumption that citizens with a balanced self-esteem do not develop the need to exclude, devalue, or attack others. A strong and balanced self-esteem is one of the most important competences in education. Only those who have experienced recognition themselves are able to recognize the rights of others. In Korea, the basic issue in this respect is a proper understanding of *uri* (our group), which is an important aspect of Korean identity. *Uri* can be a very healthy feeling of belonging to various groups, thereby giving the individual a basic *Ur-Vertrauen* (sense of basic trust, primal trust). However, the student must learn to also see the danger of *uri* as being exclusive, possibly establishing a hierarchy of own superiority and inferiority of those not belonging to one's *uri*-groups. A balance must be found between building an identity and still accept the same right for others.

Students do not only learn in school, but their worldview (“Weltanschauung”) is shaped by a multitude of influences. Tolerance education therefore needs a comprehensive approach including not only pupils, but also the teachers, the parents, and finally the whole community. And lately the internet is exerting an enormous influence, so the student has to learn a critical approach to internet contents, just like he has to learn to critically read newspapers and books, not accepting the contents at face value.

“Multiperspectivity”, or “cultural relativism”

Another decisive approach to the development of tolerance is the so-called “multiperspectivity”, or – as I prefer to call it – *cultural relativism*. “Multiperspectivity” means to be able and willing to regard a situation or behavior from different perspectives. *Cultural relativism* means to be able to see that one’s own values and ways of doing things are only one among many, and by judging the way of others one must learn that my way is not necessarily the better one. (*Culture*, by the way, in my usage does not only mean *Korean culture* vs. any other *non-Korean culture*. The concept of culture also refers to lower levels like e.g, urban culture vs. rural culture, or in Seoul the different cultures of north of the river Han and south of the river Han, or middle class culture vs. lower class culture, young people’s culture vs. older peoples’s culture, male culture vs. female culture, and so on.

The ability to accept “multiperspectivity” and *cultural relativism* should be learnt at an early stage of education so that the willingness to accept another perspective as equally valid will not be blocked by prejudice and fear.

Precondition as well as part of “multiperspectivity” and *cultural relativism* is the knowledge of one's own perspective (a positive

understanding of *uri*). The awareness of one's own position reveals what in contrast we fear of the other, the foreign, person or culture. As an example I want to take the teaching of history. In school it is necessary, e.g. to teach Korean history. But – at least in the higher grades – this teaching should also include the discussion of differing views from scholars outside of Korea, or those scholars inside Korea who challenge the simple widely accepted views. The study of history is really the study of *historiography*, together with interpreting the known facts. Understanding the reasons for previous different views about one's own culture and creating a view suitable to current political and social situations can open the mind for understanding differing views. The recent conflict between Korea and China over Goguryeo is a case to contemplate in this respect. The ability to change the perspective also requires the capacity to understand in how far the other perspective of an opponent can be seen as a reaction to one's own behaviour. The student must therefore be taught the attitude of asking himself in how far another person's intolerance can be identified as a reaction to one's own - interpreted or misinterpreted - behaviour. This intolerance of the opponent could then be overcome through a change in one's own behaviour. This actually seems to be the easiest idea when it comes to how to teach tolerance in the class room. Learning to resolve classroom conflicts is learning tolerance and the art of compromising. And it also looks as if we have here an important lesson to learn for the development of a smoothly functioning of a parliamentary democracy, and of political behaviour in general, as well as for individual behaviour.

Tolerance and social stress

There is an important connection between tolerance and social stress. The tolerance threshold in a society can be conceived as a stress threshold:

The higher the social stress of a crisis, the lower the probability that stressed citizens act in a tolerant way. Social stress deals with the ratio between social and political demands on the one hand, and people's felt capacity to meet them on the other. This is also true for the small society of the pupils of a given school. Teachers must therefore find ways to reduce the stress of the students and create an amiable atmosphere of learning. For a foreigner like me it looks as if in the Korean school system, which is so highly competitive, some changes may be necessary. The remedy, of course, must be found through close cooperation between the teachers and the parents at every given school. It must conform to the given social and economic surrounding, and the school system must allow for diversity of ways and means to create such an atmosphere. Finally, students must be aware of the fact, that the level of tolerance is in continuous change in reaction to changes in the social or in the political arena. Mature citizens must therefore have learned to accept that they have to constantly watch their own as well as the society's reactions, and in case of a lowering level of tolerance they must be able to search for the reasons. Only then will it be possible to avoid falling back into unwanted situations of intolerance, because the danger can only be avoided by eliminating the causes, or at least starting to think how to react otherwise. In recent years the fear of terrorism, for instance, which is based on a real threat, never-the-less asks for a very careful balancing of necessary security measures and tolerance. In such a situation a day-to-day review of measures, which tend to be heading towards intolerance and even violation of formerly accepted human rights concepts, will be necessary, and we must prepare our students for such situations.

Obstacles

At this point I want to mention the negative role of stereotypes and

taboos, which hamper clear thinking. For the time of the Cold War or the Military Dictatorships, for instance, the possibility of a communist party in South Korea, or in a very general sense mentioning North Korea, are cases in focus. Nobody seemed to have been able to judge the actual level of danger, because even discussing these matters was strictly taboo and forbidden by law. Nobody contemplated the negative effects of these taboos, which almost led to an instable political and social situation in Korea.

Or, to take an example from Germany, the unfortunate recent history has led to Nazi and Nazi propaganda being taboo, and wearing Nazi emblems is punished by law, without any consideration of the reason, why somebody uses this emblem. (In Korea several pubs and tea houses, who called themselves Hitler actually prompted the German embassy to intervene, although, I am sure, the owners had not attempted to create a cradle for Nazi propaganda, but simply were looking for an unusual name for their establishments). The German society does not yet seem to be able to tolerate even the slightest hint at her Nazi past. There is actually a lesson to learn here. Because of this taboo, the number of dissident members at the fringes of society in Germany, who turn to Nazi thinking, is growing at the moment, and using these emblems becomes a fashion among those who – rightly or not – feel alienated or discriminated against.

One other problem with no easy solution is a strategy to deal with *others*, who themselves are intolerant. Very often they are asking for tolerance, which they themselves are not willing to take as their leading principle. These days, as an example, militant rougues, who we generally call islamists pose such a problem. People find it very difficult to distinguish between religious Islam, cultural Islam, and the rougues, and even in the political realm most statements lack clear insight. The examples I referred to are serious obstacles to tolerance education, highlighting the importance of tolerance education.

Concluding remarks

To turn to a more positive note, I want to mention the recent shift from strict national, anti-foreigner, and exclusive thinking centered around a presumed one-race Korean blood to greater and greater acceptance of a multi-cultural and multi-racial Korea. This shift, prompted by economic and social necessities, has taken place relatively quietly, and is very interesting to the foreign observer. It gives me hope, that the ground for tolerance education is well prepared.

Finally I want to stress that the base of tolerance is not only knowing about the *other*, it is much more the *respect* for the *other*. And *sympathy* resulting from knowing not only what is different, but also why. Teaching knowledge about other cultures (in the broad sense of various levels I mentioned above) is definitely necessary, but it must be accompanied by instilling respect. Otherwise the result would be exoticism, would be the feeling how wonderful one's own culture is and how funny the other. And, of course, race, skin colour, other religions and the like, must be learned to be based on one single, basic sameness: the human being.

❖ References

- K. Peter Fritzsche, K. Peter. *Tolerance and Tolerance Education – An Introduction*.
http://www.friedenspaedagogik.de/english/topics_of_the_institute_s_work/tolerance_and_tolerance_education_an_introduction, last entered May 18, 2010