How Is Tolerance Being Addressed in Middle School Classrooms?

Current News Headlines

**Cracking Down on Drunken Driving**

**City’s Battle against Smoking Goes Back Centuries**

**Rhode Island Public School Agrees to Remove Prayer**
(Reuters.com, February 17, 2012)

**Fix Social Security**
(USA Today, April 26, 2012, p. 1)

**Schools Take on Student Bullying**
(San Diego Union-Tribune, May 8, 2012, p. A3)

**Obama Gets Pressure in Gay Marriage Flap**
(San Diego Union-Tribune, May 8, 2012, p. A2)

People’s responses to news headlines such as these bring one’s own level of tolerance to the surface. While reading each of the above headlines, it might be interesting for you to use a scale from 1 to 5 to gauge your degree of tolerance for each position identified. In order to do so, let’s look to the dictionary (www.dictionary.com) to help us establish common definitions of the terms *tolerance* and *intolerance*.

**toleration (n).** A fair, objective, and permissive attitude toward opinions and practices that differ from one’s own.

**intolerance (n).** Lack of toleration; unwillingness or refusal to tolerate or respect contrary opinions or beliefs, persons of different races or backgrounds, etc.

It seems that being tolerant involves an acceptance of diversity; you accept that people or ideas differ and believe that these differences can coexist. To tolerate differences means that while you may not agree, you consent to coexist without disapproving in ways that would cause harm. Being tolerant is acknowledging that those around us possess different perspectives, while agreeing to disagree.

Are there times when one should not be tolerant? Most would answer “yes” if the issue involved a topic or incident that was believed to be ethically or morally wrong. But a review of news headlines indicates that there seem to be few subjects where there is consensus about what is morally and ethically correct. For this reason, it seems that a climate of peaceful coexistence is what schools need to foster—a climate that allows for differences and ensures that abusive language or physical consequences do not occur.

But is that enough? Is tolerance today only about keeping the peace? Groups that have been traditionally marginalized say “no.” They’re not asking to be tolerated; they are demanding acceptance and equal treatment. Tolerance 2.0 is pushing these boundaries. Are you realizing, like we did, that there are many dimensions to consider when thinking about the questions, “What...
Pumpian  |  Tolerance: Woven into the Fabric of the School, or Not?

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...does it mean to be tolerant? What roles should teachers and schools play in establishing and promoting a culture of tolerance?” It is an awareness that tolerance is not something that is simply taught to students; there must be a concomitant examination of our own beliefs.

Fortunately, the authors in this issue address these questions by illustrating their efforts to promote informed tolerance among middle school students, their teachers, and their administrators. To begin, Ian Pumpian posits that tolerance is the foundation of successful twenty-first-century lives. He supports this premise by first sharing an intriguing analysis of the question, *What if the total population of middle school students in the United States were shrunk to a middle school of 100 students?* He urges administrators and teachers to become mediators of a school culture that actively promotes experiences where students can examine their understandings of others. He concludes that since school is a microcosm of the world, tolerant perspectives learned in school can carry into future life experiences.

Through their work with preservice teachers, Kristine Pytash, Denise Morgan, and Katherine Batchelor help us realize that educators must be taught how to create classroom cultures that promote tolerance and social equity. Since teacher candidates may have limited understandings of the causes of intolerance and the emotional and academic ramifications for perpetrators and victims, they must be supported in gaining these insights. These authors created a space for learning by sharing adolescent literature that portrays characters who are bullies or are being bullied. By examining these situations and discussing the roles teachers should play in them, these candidates moved from shock to identifying how they could become change agents.

Kevin Cordi and Kimberly Masturzo take on the subject of cyberbullying, first by reflecting on their own experiences as both the bully and the bullied. Using their stories and those in *Dear Bully*, a compilation of 70 authors’ bully stories, they caused their preservice teachers to consider the factors that promote situational bullying. Students shared their personal stories through digital storytelling and grew in their understanding of the significant role teachers must play in educating students about tolerance.

Cheryl James-Ward moves the study of cultural insensitivity to the graduate level as she and her students explore racial stereotypes. How quickly Ward’s students were able to identify negative racial stereotypes, fully 80 years after Katz and Brady (1933) found the same thing among their adult students. The feelings of hurt and outrage that these graduate students experienced as they read stereotypes that were directed toward their cultural groups helped them envision what is felt in middle school classrooms. Identifying that stereotypes do exist, even among otherwise enlightened educators, may be a first step toward expanding tolerance.

Margaret Berg challenges us to be on guard for desensitization to cyberbullying of gay youth. She applies a gay theory lens to surface issues and encourages teachers to include gay and lesbian literature on their bookshelves so that all students can see that these are not texts to be hidden. This will be a major step for many educators who pride themselves on building a tolerant climate based on race, culture, language, and economics, yet who remain hesitant to include gay literature for fear of offending others.

The specifics of how to use a social justice approach to teach middle schoolers about the consequences of intolerance are shared by Debi Khasnabis and Kevin Upton. Through a unit of study involving eighth graders in process drama, discussion, and digital filmmaking, they developed understandings about the victim, the perpetrator, the allies, and the situational causes of bullying. Students also gained insight about their power to take action against such intolerance.

Language arts teachers Cindy Tarrant, Stacy Daniel, and Dawn Bolton are concerned educators who believe that empathetic students are less likely to tolerate intolerance. They taught a curriculum designed to expand their students’ cultural and social awareness. They describe a plan that involved students from two different
school communities connected through social networks. The students viewed culturally sensitive films, read adolescent literature that showcased these themes, and then discussed these on wikis established for this purpose. Conversation increased multicultural awareness, and students realized that diversity exists all around them and that these differences enrich one’s life.

While many questions remain about how to best teach tolerance and how to create school cultures that model it, we are certain that Tolerance 2.0 requires that we critically examine our own beliefs and practices. In doing so, we are better able to promote such understandings among our students, whose success in a global society means recognizing and allowing for differences. Embracing these differences means moving beyond tolerance to acceptance and empowerment of a community of learners.

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**Candidates Announced for Middle Level Section Elections:**

**Watch for Your Ballot**

The Middle Level Section Nominating Committee has named the following candidates for Section offices in the NCTE spring elections:

**For Members of the Middle Level Section Steering Committee** (two to be elected; terms to expire in 2017)—Jason Griffith, Carlisle Area High School, Pennsylvania; Amy Gutierrez Baker, West Jefferson Middle School, Conifer, Colorado; Margaret Hale, University of Houston, Texas; Latrice D. Rogers, Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland.

**For Members of the Middle Level Section Nominating Committee** (three to be elected; terms to expire in 2014)—Molly J. Bestge, West Fargo Public Schools, North Dakota; Elizabeth Dinkins, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky; Carrie Ann Gehringer, Fort Bragg Middle School, California; Emily Green, Maumee Valley Country Day School, Toledo, Ohio; Laurie A. Henry, University of Kentucky, Lexington; Justin Stygles, Rowe Elementary School, Maine.

Members of the 2012–13 Middle Level Section Nominating Committee are Zanetta Robinson, Thurgood Marshall Fundamental Middle School, St. Petersburg, Florida, chair; Mollie Blackburn, Ohio State University, Columbus; and Katrina Gonzales, Eldorado Middle School, Texas.