Chapter 4  
Learning to be Tolerant: Lessons from Research

Kerry J. Kennedy

1 Introduction

The school curriculum has been an abiding interest for Phillip Hughes and he has explored its diversity in many different contexts. It was of central concern when he presided over a new education system in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) as Chair of the ACT Schools Authority (1973–1977). It was equally salient when he reported to the Queensland government in 1991 on the kind of changes that were needed to reform the management and delivery of the school curriculum in that state (Hughes, 1991). Further afield, his interests extended to the Gulf States early in the new century as new curriculum issues emerged in that part of the world (Hughes, 2001). By that time he had already made his views known about the challenges that this new century posed for societies faced with change and uncertainty (Hughes, 1994).

Along with this interest in the school curriculum was a strongly held commitment to fairness and social justice, as evidenced by his extensive work for UNESCO as well as deeply held personal values. The two interests go together since the school curriculum is an important way to both promote social justice as well as live it out in classrooms and schools. Yet as we journey through these early years of the twenty-first century, evidence is provided daily that social justice remains as elusive as ever. Yet Hughes’ own values and his faith in the efficacy of the school curriculum remind us that the struggle is more important now than ever before. We need to understand how social justice can be infused into the curriculum and how we can teach for outcomes that will promote just and fair societies. This is enduring work that has its roots deep in Hughes’ lifelong commitments and it is to those ends that it is dedicated. The particular focus of this chapter is one in which Hughes has had a continuing interest and he provided the background paper the 1994 Commission of the Australian Government. (Hughes, 1994)

The new century started with the hope of a new beginning. Yet it did not take long for the wounds and scars of the previous century to make their presence felt. By 2001, terrorism had shown a new face in the USA and in successive years it emerged in other places with seemingly new vigor and relentlessness. Not exclusively an “import”, in countries such as England and Spain terrorism showed itself to be very much a home-grown product. Wars waged in response to terrorism have led to renewed civil violence and seemingly irreconcilable conflict. Yet violence also appeared on a number of domestic fronts. Marginalized ethnic groups
in Paris took to the streets in 2005 in a rampage of damage and destruction to protest their economic and social exploitation. In Sydney in the same year, white supremacist groups waged a campaign to “take back the beaches” and groups of “middle-eastern youth” responded in kind.

The recalcitrance of human kind to opt for intolerance over tolerance was overtly recognized in the 1990s when the United Nations declared 1995 the International Year of Tolerance “to generate awareness among both policymakers and the public of the dangers associated with contemporary forms of intolerance” (UNESCO, 1995). Indeed, it might well be argued that tolerance is under even greater pressure today that it was a decade ago. The questions raised then remain relevant and provide the rationale for focusing this chapter on tolerance and learning:

Intolerance has been ever present in human history. It has ignited most wars, fuelled religious persecutions and violent ideological confrontations. Is it inherent in human nature? Is it insurmountable? Can tolerance be learned? How can democracies deal with intolerance without infringing on individual freedoms? How can they foster individual codes of conduct, without laws and without policing their citizens’ behaviour? How can peaceful multiculturalism be achieved? (UNESCO, 1995).

How tolerance is learned remains the subject of speculation. Yet a recent study that included a focus on student attitudes to different community groups (Torney-Purta et al., 2001) has provided some insight into how young adolescents develop tolerance – and intolerance. The picture that has been developed in subsequent secondary analysis of the original data is complex but needs to be understood by policymakers, school authorities, and classroom teachers. School cannot be entirely responsible for the development of tolerant societies – this is a role for the whole of society. Yet if schools are aware of the conditions that exacerbate intolerance, they can work actively to eliminate it and thus contribute to broader social objectives.

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to review what is now known about adolescent attitudes to tolerance and intolerance, with special although not exclusive reference to the IEA Civic Education Study results as well as subsequent secondary analysis of that data. In drawing together this emerging literature, the focus will be on recommendations for future action so that the future might be one where tolerance rather than intolerance will be pervasive. There is nothing inevitable about the future and trends that have been so dominant in the first five years of the new century need not become permanently ingrained in the century’s development. The future very much rests with young people and hopefully the issues raised in this chapter will help to ensure that it is a future that can advance the cause of a just and caring global community.

The chapter will be divided into three sections:

1. A brief introduction to the IEA Civic Education Study and in particular the section that dealt with student attitudes to community groups
2. A review of relevant literature relating to the results of the IEA Civic Education Study and subsequent secondary analyses as well as other literature relating to students’ tolerance and intolerance of community groups
3. Recommendations for societies and their schools to take action that can contribute towards eradicating intolerance amongst young people