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Publication date

2022

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The Social Contract of the tolerant city

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Maussen, M. (2022). Wokeness and tolerance in the inclusive school. In *The Social Contract of the tolerant city: Bundle of short essays on the meaning of tolerance for Amsterdam* (pp. 10-18). Urgent.

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WOKENESS AND TOLERANCE IN THE INCLUSIVE SCHOOL

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Growing up and attending school in a culturally and religiously diverse city can provide an opportunity to learn from others and enjoy a variety of human experiences and expressions. But it can also be a painful experience, marked by exclusion, discrimination, and stigmatization of oneself and the group one is believed to belong to.

In our society differences correlate strongly with inequalities. Inequalities are about having more versus having less. If we look at Dutch society it is obvious that wealth, income, education, health, housing,

prestige, and access to important social positions are very unequally distributed. Because of the ways these inequalities have intersected over many centuries with differences such as gender,

skin color, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity, certain groups are marginalized and disadvantaged, whereas others are privileged.



THE ISSUE OF 'DIVERSITY'

It is against this social background that the issue of 'diversity' presents itself. That is, the fact that within a society or institution, people are different in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, worldview, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or national origin. This means that we cannot conceive of the diversity within organizations or institutions such as schools without situating it against the background of the inequalities in our societies.

The broad and complex discussion around inequality in education is about these relations between wider social inequalities and what is going on in schools.¹ The fact is that in most Dutch schools, children continue to have unequal chances to be successful. This is in part related to their social background and parents' education and profession, but also correlates with their ethnicity, cultural upbringing, and skin color.

This means that over and beyond being alert to how inequalities in wider society matter for the composition of schools and the opportunities of pupils, we should also be concerned about overt and subconscious processes of discrimination and exclusion; about the impact of dominant norms and stereotypes; and about ways pupils and staff can engage with differences.

¹ Merry, M. S., *Educational Justice: Liberal Ideals, Persistent Inequality, and the Constructive Uses of Critique* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)



In this short essay I focus on ways of engaging with difference, especially when it entails disagreements, contrasting viewpoints, and differing values. In exploring these concepts, it is helpful to think of the school as a mini society. This does not mean the school is shielded and isolated from surrounding society, which enters in all kinds of ways including stories and experiences, social media and images, emotions and opinions.

I mean to say that a school has opportunities to shape interactions and forms of engagement. The teachers and school management can stipulate some 'rules of the game' and discuss these with pupils. The school is a place of learning, not only about specific cognitive content but also about how to relate and interact with others in a respectful and pleasant way. It can be a place to learn to reflect on your ideas and identity and how they resemble or diverge from those of others.

Even if we were able to create schools where opportunities are fully equal, there would still be differences and potential for conflict. The challenge remains engaging across difference in ways that strengthen mutual understanding and support for democratic attitudes such as inclusion and openness to disagreements, rather than undermine them. Some people seem to believe that the way forward is to make differences irrelevant. On the postmodern left, we hear people say that we can relativize differences of world views and identities, and that once we 'stop giving a f#ck' about what others do or say we can all be free and equal. On the radical populist and religious right, we hear that we should remove the differences that disrupt our societies and divert from dominant cultural norms by striving for ethnically and culturally homogeneous nations, and by forcing newcomers to assimilate. In my view, both perspectives are naïve, undemocratic, and potentially dangerous.

“EVEN IF WE WERE ABLE TO CREATE SCHOOLS WHERE OPPORTUNITIES ARE FULLY EQUAL, THERE WOULD STILL BE DIFFERENCES AND POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT.”

Rather than hoping that difference can be made irrelevant or suppressed we must acknowledge that we need to learn to cope with the disagreements, uneasiness, and conflicts that are generated by contrasting world views, identities, norms, expressions, and behaviors.

For a long time, tolerance was deemed a promising paradigm to think about engaging with diversity. The 'tolerant city' was supposedly a city of 'live and let live,' where expressions and

communities that deviated from the societal norm were given some room to exist. It was a place where citizens and public authorities had learned to restrain judgment, to not openly express animosity in public, and not actively oppress or violently persecute minorities. These stories about tolerance are often used to produce an image of Amsterdam and the Netherlands as places where religious tolerance existed in the seventeenth century, and where since the 1960s people and practices

that were still considered deviant and morally wrong elsewhere were able to exist in the public eye.² But in our age the concept of tolerance has been discredited. It is seen as falling short of granting equal respect to minorities. Tolerance means that those who 'deviate' from the dominant norms merely deserve to be 'tolerated,' whereas in a society that is based on equality, all citizens — including those belonging to cultural, religious, or sexual minorities — deserve full equal rights and positive recognition.³ Over the past 40 years we have seen a turn away from tolerance and towards a politics of 'recognition' and 'identity,' which aims for a society in which all have equal standing and there can be more genuine acceptance and celebration of diversity and difference.

² Whether that image is correct is another matter. See Maussen, M., Bogers, T., and Versteeg, I., *Tolerance and Cultural Diversity Discourses in the Netherlands* (2012).

³ Walters, S.D., *The Tolerance Trap. How God, Genes, and Good Intentions are Sabotaging Gay Equality* (New York: New York University, 2014)

TOLERANCE AND ITS LIMITS

Tolerance is inevitably tied up with inequalities of power and with a negative judgement on what the 'Other' stands for, believes, or does. The more dominant groups who represent the norm may decide to 'tolerate' minorities. In the classical definition by Preston King, "X tolerates Y, if X disapproves of what Y does, has the power to do something about it, but voluntarily abstains from doing so."⁴

The power imbalance that is presupposed in this definition firstly means that tolerance implies there are groups that can tolerate and there are groups that can merely hope 'to be tolerated.' The latter are less powerful. Secondly, tolerance is crucially connected to dislike and disapproval of what the other stands for and does. Thirdly, tolerance is unstable and temporary. Looming over it is the constant risk that 'one day' there will no longer be room for tolerance, and individuals and groups will again be subjected to exclusion and persecution.

Seen in this light, tolerance is an outdated and not very attractive concept to use when trying to teach children and adolescents how to relate to others who are

different from themselves.

But there are also more contemporary definitions of tolerance that are more robust. The philosopher Reiner Frost speaks of 'secure tolerance;' and Irish philosopher, Iseult Honohan, claims that tolerance can exist if people grant each other a 'secure status,' meaning they acknowledge that they are of equal worth and deserve equal opportunities to live their life as they want.⁵

These philosophers continue to believe in the power of tolerance because it fully acknowledges that pluralism will result in tensions and discomfort. Rather than wishing tensions away we must see them as inevitable and possibly even profitable. In a democratic society we can handle many disagreements related to morality, to taste, to world views, and convictions. We should not teach our children and ask our fellow citizens to trivialize and relativize their deepest convictions and ideas about what is good and right. But we ask them to acknowledge that others may have other ideas and convictions about issues they themselves feel very strongly about and that they may even see as constitutive of who they are.

The fact of pluralism is precisely that: a fact. It may produce moments of joy and trigger curiosity, but it can also lead to discomfort, doubts, feeling offended, or wanting to tell the other that she is mistaken.

The normative commitment of a democratic society it to accept the fact of pluralism and to endorse the common framework of rights and liberties that in a liberal-democratic society should enable us to live together peacefully. And even if a person continues to think negatively about the ways other people behave, about the ideas they have, or the ways they express themselves, she should nonetheless and unconditionally recognize that they deserve equal freedoms and equal opportunities.

WOKENESS

An alternative perspective to think about ways of engaging with differences has been gaining popularity rapidly in recent years, especially among younger generations. It is the idea of 'wokeness,' which refers to the necessity and willingness to become 'aware' of the many inequalities and forms of racism and sexism that are present in our societies. Being 'woke' means being alert to the ways in which power inequalities and exclusion are being reproduced constantly. The idea is that by exposing the ways derogatory meanings continue to be used, those who are already 'awoken' can guide others.

Wokeness has come to be associated with moral righteousness and entitlement, where young people who claim to be 'woke' are on the lookout for insensitive speech and action. The support for wokeness is often coupled to the idea that the 'woke' person is more able to 'embrace diversity' and live according to the motto 'just be yourself, and let others be themselves too.' Conversely, the not-yet-woke persons are still caught up in old-fashioned

'norms' and by consequence are 'bothered' by the ways in which other people want to lead their lives. However, such a view on differences in fact risks relativizing and trivializing moral and political views. It suggests that on the horizon there is a society without conflict where everyone will be 'woke' and willing to 'embrace diversity.' This in turn has led to a hard backlash against 'wokeness,' which is seen as the newest fashion in identity politics and a tool to silence anyone who does not join in the mantras of those claiming to speak for the oppressed and marginalized.⁶

So are we left with two failing perspectives about how to engage with diversity? And what does this mean in an age in which it seems more relevant than ever to offer younger generations an opportunity to learn the skills and virtues to engage with others who are different from them, to interact in respectful ways, to cherish their own values and ideas without combatting and suppressing those of others?

⁴ King, P., *Toleration* (Routledge, 2013).

⁵ Forst, R., 'To tolerate Means to Insult' in van den Brink, B. and Owen, D. (eds) *Recognition and Power. Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp.406-442. Honohan, I., 'Toleration and Non-Domination' in Modood, T. and Dobbernack, J. (eds) *Tolerance, Intolerance and Respect: Hard to Accept?* (2013) pp.77-100.

⁶ Spinoza 2007, p 239.



SCHOOLS AND TOLERANCE

What can schools and school teachers in our city do to further enhance the abilities of pupils to engage with differences? The conditions in which pupils interact in part depend on the ways existing inequalities in Amsterdam result in unequal conditions in schools. The power to shape these structural conditions are by and large outside the realm of influence of school administrations and teachers.

But schools and teachers do play a role in helping pupils learn about what it means to experience difference and about the strategies and virtues that in a democratic society are available to respond to differences. So what can teachers and schools do to bring the social contract of a tolerant city to life? I propose three suggestions by way of conclusion.

FIRST, schools can combine the insights of 'wokeness' and toleration in framing the challenges of diversity and difference. 'Wokeness' helps pupils to become more alert to the structural and subconscious dimensions of racism, prejudices, discrimination, and exclusion; and learn to see what they mean for the day-to-day experiences of themselves and their fellow pupils. In addition, tolerance suggests that it is okay to have strong views and emotions about societal, political, religious, moral, and lifestyle issues, and that it is inevitable that other people may have other ideas, values, and convictions. Tolerance teaches us that we should engage with those differences in a respectful way. It drives us to recognize the right of everyone to exist and participate in full in Dutch society and in the school context; and to fight against any form of discrimination and exclusion because of differences.

SECOND, schools can be crucial linkages between the more abstract ideas about tolerance and diversity, and the concrete experiences of day-to-day interactions in a school context. As democratic citizens we must learn to act together in a respectful and polite manner. We must learn the virtue of accepting expressions of emotions and feelings when a fellow pupil or teacher is confronted with something hurtful or discriminatory. In doing so, we can come to appreciate that there are so many opportunities to collaborate and act together irrespective of commonalities and differences. In order for these experiences to actually take place in schools, important steps are being taken these days to ensure 'social safety' and respectful interactions. If we look at the ongoing public outcry about the omnipresence of harassment, discrimination, bullying, and lack of safety in society at large, it is clear that creating a socially safe environment in schools will demand great efforts.

THIRD, schools present an institutional context in which pupils and adolescents can learn how to engage with differences of opinion. Here, pupils experience how to conduct discussions on societal and political topics that are so important for democracies. In our age of polarization and the drifting apart of groups that unite around radical views on social media, the school can and should be a learning space for democracy.

This is not an easy task, and many teachers will have witnessed societal polarization result in polarization within classrooms. Still, the fact that the school is a social environment that is relatively 'shielded' from a polarizing world, and where rules of behavior and respectful interaction can be monitored and upheld, provides a crucial opportunity to learn and experience what democratic debate should look like.⁷ ■

⁷ See Maarten van Alstein, *Omgaan met controverse en polarisatie in de klas* (Vlaams Vredesinstituut en Pelckmans Pro, 2018)

“BEING ‘WOKE’ MEANS BEING ALERT TO THE WAYS IN WHICH POWER INEQUALITIES AND EXCLUSION ARE BEING REPRODUCED CONSTANTLY.”



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