

# How To Develop Tolerance In Societies

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## ABSTRACT

This paper briefly explores the idea of tolerance and how it might work in business and society. More importantly, how can we develop it systematically?

### 1. Introduction

There are many stories of injustice in the world — historic injustice and present injustice. Persistent injustice. For many of us these are invisible — we are the lucky ones.

I am an accidental immigrant, building a life somewhere new although I had never planned to do that. In twenty years I have experienced only two overtly racist incidents, but many people I know have stories of constant, relentless tension and abuse and, if you put yourself out there today and become more visible, there is no shortage of people who will come out to have a go at you.

The technology of today, especially the Internet, gives us the ability to share more about ourselves and gain a richer insight into the lives of others. At the same time it allows us to be more insular, select and follow only that information and those providers that reinforce and support our points of view, biased or not.

What should you do if you want to be different? This paper explores some of those ideas.

### 2. Making tolerance the core of a curriculum

The subject of this paper is inspired by a book called “The freedom writer’s diary” about a teacher and her class of teens and how they used writing to explore and change their lives. It starts with a student teacher, Erin Gruwell, who got hold of a picture showing a racial caricature of one of her students. She compared it to the kind of propaganda the Nazis used but none of her students had heard of the holocaust. Nearly everyone, however, had been shot at. She writes, “I immediately decided to throw out my meticulously planned lessons and make tolerance the core of my curriculum.”

Gruwell’s approach to this was to get students writing diaries and sharing their experiences. Experiences that are shared by some and alien to others. For me personally most of Western culture is alien and different. I grew up in a different place in different circumstances and the Beatles were never a thing. But the world is smaller now, the world of my children and my children’s children will be very different and it’s worth spending some time to think about what kind of world that might be.

One of the things that is probably worth remembering is that people are not very different from the way they were. Abuses in society have been perpetrated when the powerful felt they could get away with it. When they had control. You don’t need to look very far to find stories of power and corruption, from politicians to the clergy, from student cliques to people traffickers. They are all around us and the scars persist over generations.

It can seem hopeless but what is different now is that almost everyone has the power and ability to speak out — to tell their story. When there is transparency, when there is nowhere to hide — then something happens. Human beings can do horrible things when they believe there will never be any consequences. When they are afraid, however, of being found out, they seem to behave better.

Maybe that’s unfair. Perhaps conscience matters more than we think and many people will do the right thing even when no one is looking. But conscience is a personal thing and society is a group thing and there is lots of evidence that we as human beings will suppress what our conscience says when we are pressured by what our groups think. And that is why being able to see

what is going on is more likely to result in the outcomes we want.

But what are those outcomes exactly?

### 3. Developing the ability to tolerate

If we read what the United Nations has to say on the matter, one of its bodies — UNESCO — talks about how societies still have discrimination, racism and inequality. They talk about how action must be based on human rights and gender equality, how diversity and inclusion must be built into the way cities and groups operate. And they explicitly talk about “breaking the silence” when it comes to the slave trade and slavery.

This is not new, clearly, but for many people who come across an idea for the first time it is new to them. The idea that tolerance in a society is not something that springs naturally and fully formed but needs to be conceptualised and nurtured can be a surprise. What is natural, perhaps, is tribalism and factionalism — the politics of hate and division, of us and them.

The way to change, according to UNESCO, is to approach the issue from a “human-rights based approach and a gender lens” and work with others “through dialogue, capacity-building and advocacy.”

This makes very good sense but how do you go about doing that?

### 4. Teaching and reinforcing tolerance

Well, the Internet comes up with approaches pretty quickly. The British Council, for example, has a model<sup>1</sup> for a ‘culturally inclusive school’ that is perhaps less of a model and more of a brainstorm, almost a first pass at the elements you need to build a model. For example it is based within a context of national policy and funding, regional support, community engagement and a legal framework.

In modern society this legal framework seems particularly important — something those of us who are not lawyers do not always appreciate. We think that laws reflect the views of society and to some extent they do but they can also be used to reflect the society we want to have.

For example, the UK’s commitments on climate change are legally binding targets and they are having an impact on how organisations position themselves because many operate to comply rather than lead.

Practically, however, how do we actually make these things happen? And I suppose that comes down to the hard job of capacity building, of raising finance and finding the right people and creating plans and putting a system in place that will help result in the outcomes we want. There are people out there with the money to fund these initiatives, whether it’s public money or philanthropic money. There are people who want the right kind of change to happen. And it’s a question of putting them together. Some initiatives will be flickering candles in the darkness, others will be well-lit communities. Gruwell’s story is about being a candle, about her efforts in the first year being cancelled in the next because she embarrassed the establishment. But she kept going with another class, and change happened whether the establishment liked it or not. But the establishment will fight back as well — no one is guaranteed a win, even if you are on the side of good. But, I suppose, you have to try and create the institutions that will help change to happen.

### 5. Conclusion

What we teach our children matters. At home we teach them our biases and history and the things that we assume are right. And at school they should be taught what is good and true and best for humanity.

We all have different experiences. When I went to school we had textbooks and rote learning and never really learned much about critical thinking. It’s only decades later through my blog and these papers that I am able to explore things that are taught to six and seven year olds these days.

Maybe some of us need to go back to grade school to see how it’s done now.

### About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

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## References

1. Rashid, N and Tikly, L, *Guidelines for inclusion and diversity in schools*, <https://www.britishcouncil.es/sites/default/files/british-council-guidelines-for-inclusion-and-diversity-in-schools.pdf>.