

Teacher training for tolerance education in schools amid rising student aggression

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Abstract

The increasing incidence of student aggression and intolerance presents a significant challenge to the safety and inclusiveness of educational environments globally. This paper analyzes the role of teacher training as a fundamental mechanism for advancing tolerance education and preventing violence in schools. Tolerance is conceptualized as a professional and ethical competence that integrates emotional resilience, empathy, and respect for diversity. Drawing on educational, psychological, and sociological perspectives, this study frames teacher training as a transformative process that prepares educators to model non-violent communication, facilitate constructive dialogue, and promote social cohesion. The analysis identifies experiential learning, reflective practice, and social-emotional development as core elements of effective teacher preparation. It also underscores the necessity of systemically integrating tolerance education into both pre-service and in-service professional development programs. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of institutional commitment and supportive educational policies that sustain these efforts across the school system. The findings indicate that empowering teachers as facilitators of peace and inclusion contributes to reducing aggression and establishing school cultures based on respect, equity, and shared humanity.

Keywords: tolerance, schools, student aggression, education.

Introduction

Education is intended to be a transformative force that empowers learners with the knowledge, values, and skills to act as agents of peace in their communities (UNESCO, n.d.). This ideal is predicated on education's capacity to reduce violence (Hughes, 2020). However, school violence is a pervasive and escalating issue in many regions (UNESCO, 2025a). Globally, UNESCO (2025a) reports that one in three learners' experiences bullying monthly, and over 36% of students are involved in physical fights each year. In the United States, a study by the American Psychological Association found that reports of verbal harassment or threatening behavior from students toward teachers rose from 33% during the pandemic to 80% after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted (Goldman, 2024). The absence of mutual respect for diversity risks deepening social divisions, as evidenced by a global increase in

intolerance and conflict. Collaborative efforts are required to address the root causes of these divisions, including poverty, gender, disability, and cultural differences (UNESCO, 2019).

In an interconnected world facing complex transnational challenges, literacy and numeracy alone are insufficient. The values, content, and context of education significantly influence how young people interpret the world and choose to act within it (UNESCO, 2025b). School violence manifests in various forms. According to UNESCO (2025a), these include physical violence (e.g., fights, corporal punishment), psychological violence (e.g., verbal abuse, social exclusion), and sexual violence (e.g., unwanted touching, rape). Bullying represents an intersection of physical and psychological violence, while sexual harassment can encompass all three forms.

In response, UNESCO (2025a) supports the prevention of and response to school violence through education to foster safer learning environments. Teaching tolerance involves fostering an understanding of multi-faith perspectives, the benefits of pluralism, and the importance of human rights (Thames, 2022). Despite increasing societal diversity, tolerance education is seldom prioritized in international education agendas. The concept of tolerance can be interpreted through multiple lenses (Türkan, 2015). From an axiological perspective, it is a universal human value that facilitates interpersonal understanding. Philosophically, it is a style of existence grounded in humility and patience. Pedagogically, it is an educational ideal manifested in attitudes of respect and openness. Psychologically, it is a necessity for self-affirmation and social communication. Sociologically, it is a norm for harmonious interaction, and from a humanistic perspective, it is a principle of social coexistence based on human dignity and freedom (Türkan, 2015).

Conceptualizing Tolerance Education

Tolerance education is rooted in the principle that students must learn respect for diversity and non-violence. UNESCO's *Recommendation on Education for Peace and Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development* emphasizes that "building more peaceful, just, and sustainable societies starts with education. It influences all aspects of our daily lives and overall prospects, and is in turn affected by our health and environment. In the global landscape of worsening climate change, democratic backsliding, persistent inequalities, rising discrimination, hate speech, violence and conflict, it can be a tool to address and prevent these problems in the future. And it can also be a long-term investment with increasing returns if shaped and deployed effectively". UNESCO's *Global citizenship education* (GCED) looks into these elements to support learners of all ages to become ethical, empathetic and respectful human beings who can adapt to the world rapidly moving forward, even amidst its most complex challenges and threats. UNESCO is advancing GCED across subjects and in all spheres of life to provide them with knowledge, skills and attitudes that cultivate tolerance, respect, and a shared sense of belonging to one global community, with the ultimate goal of ensuring human rights and peace.

Intercultural education complements this by teaching students about different cultures and identities, emphasizing that diversity is an asset and that mutual respect is essential to avoid societal division (UNESCO, 2019). Initiatives such as "Learning to Live Together" promote cultural diversity and non-violence, preparing learners to contribute to sustainable development and peace (Tarhouni & Schöfthaler, 2003). The concept of "learning to live together," one of the four pillars of education outlined in the Delors Report, addresses the

fundamental challenge of living harmoniously with others while respecting their distinct identities (p. 268, as cited in Hiang-Chu, 2024).

Global citizenship education (GCED) focuses on developing learners' roles as world citizens, fostering empathy, respect, and critical thinking to navigate diversity and uphold democratic values (UNESCO, 2019). Tolerance can also be developed indirectly through the cultivation of student personality. Research indicates that students with realistic self-esteem, a high degree of self-actualization, and low dogmatism score higher on measures of tolerance; therefore, education that fosters these traits indirectly promotes tolerance (Afdal, 2006, p. 132).

Understanding Student Aggression

A comprehensive understanding of student aggression requires integrating psychological, social, and educational perspectives. From a *psychological perspective*, aggression is shaped by the interaction of biological predispositions, cognitive distortions, and emotional regulation deficits. Neurobiological vulnerabilities, such as reduced prefrontal cortex control and heightened limbic system reactivity, can increase impulsive tendencies (Raine, 2002). Personality traits including high neuroticism and low agreeableness have also been linked to aggressive behavior, as they can weaken self-control and amplify emotional volatility (Dam et al., 2021; Chester, 2024). Cognitive models, such as the General Aggression Model (Bushman & Anderson, 2002) and Cognitive Neoassociation Theory (Berkowitz, 2012), posit that aggression results from the interplay between affective arousal, hostile interpretations of social cues, and situational triggers. Students with a hostile attribution bias are more likely to perceive neutral interactions as provocative, and moral disengagement allows them to justify aggressive actions without guilt (Bandura, 1986).

From a *social perspective*, aggression is sustained and reinforced within peer networks and the broader school climate. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2014) indicates that students acquire aggressive behaviors through observational learning, witnessing such behaviors being modeled and rewarded by peers or media figures. These behaviors are then maintained through social reinforcement, such as peer approval or perceived dominance (Huesmann, 1988). In peer groups where aggression is associated with strength or popularity, retaliatory actions can serve defensive and reputational purposes (Berg & Felson, 2020). Cultural norms that tolerate or valorize aggression as self-assertion further lead students to internalize it as an acceptable social strategy (Guerra & Huesmann, 2004).

From an *educational perspective*, aggression represents both a challenge and an opportunity for intervention. School environments that lack clear behavioral expectations, consistent discipline, and emotional support can amplify student frustration and alienation (Agnew, 1990). Conversely, a positive school climate characterized by fairness, empathy, and collaboration functions as a protective factor by modeling constructive conflict resolution (Walker et al., 2004). Students who exhibit aggression often display early deficits in empathy and social competence, highlighting the need for proactive social-emotional learning programs. An ecological approach that aligns psychological understanding with social reinforcement and institutional policy is essential for building a culture of tolerance within the school environment.

The Essential Role of Teachers in Advancing Tolerance

The concept of "learning to live together" has emerged as a fundamental educational necessity, identified as a key challenge of our time (Hiang-Chu, 2024). Teachers' attitudes and behaviors profoundly shape the social and emotional climate of the classroom.

UNESCO (2022) emphasizes that teachers are essential in creating psychologically and physically safe environments. Positive teacher-student relationships, characterized by caring respect and guided conflict resolution, can help prevent bullying (UNESCO, 2022). Conversely, teachers who are under stress or lack training may resort to punitive discipline, potentially escalating hostilities. The theoretical consensus is that a teacher's communication style, empathy, and cultural competence directly influence whether a classroom becomes inclusive or aggressive.

Teachers can directly strengthen students' resilience to discriminatory narratives and model values of respect. However, their capacity to positively influence school environments and respond effectively to violence depends heavily on their initial preparation, ongoing professional development, and institutional support (UNESCO, 2022). In this context, pedagogical tolerance can be defined as an affective professional competence. It is expressed through physiological, psychological, and social stability when facing multiple influences, and through the acceptance of students' individual characteristics and resilience to psychotraumatic or conflictual factors. This competence establishes the foundation for tolerance education by balancing mental integrity with the art of living together with others who are different (Turcan, 2015).

Teacher Training as a Transformative Process

Preparing teachers to promote tolerance is not just a technical task; teacher education must itself be transformative. Pedagogical theories advocate for experiential learning and critical reflection. For instance, Kolb's four-stage cycle emphasizes experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting (Kolb & Kolb, 2018). Mezirow's transformative learning theory highlights critical reflection, though some critics note its limited emphasis on social action (Mezirow, 2018). Freire's critical pedagogy further contends that teachers should engage students in dialogue around social issues (Shor, 2002). In practice, teacher development programs often incorporate simulations, case study discussions (e.g., bullying scenarios), and reflective assignments. This theoretical foundation implies that training for tolerance should engage teachers experientially and encourage them to become reflective change agents in the classroom.

To better understand the impact of tolerance in educational settings, Table 1 summarizes its key advantages and challenges within social dynamics.

Table 1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Pedagogical Tolerance in Social Dynamics (Turcan, 2015).

Advantages	Challenges
Establishing communities with diverse individuals	Exceeding acceptance limits in tense situations
Self-protection by reducing sensitivity to unfavorable factors	Misinterpretation of tolerance as mere patience, potentially leading to increased aggression, violence, or moral decline
Resistance to stress	Interpersonal conflicts
Social efficiency	Stabilization of indifference toward core values
Cooperation and social coexistence	Insecurity and limitations on freedom
Development of emotional and social culture	–
Adaptation and integration	–
Professionalism	–

Within contemporary teacher education, the formation of professional competences that support tolerance and peaceful coexistence represents a central pedagogical imperative. Teacher preparation programs should therefore integrate specialized modules on *Social and Emotional Learning* (SEL) and conflict resolution skills, as these domains underpin the affective, ethical, and interpersonal dimensions of pedagogical practice. Recommended topics include the development of empathy, non-violent communication, and mediation abilities, skills that enable teachers to cultivate climates of mutual respect and social harmony within educational settings.

UNESCO (2024) underscores that SEL equips students with the capacity to understand and regulate emotions, demonstrate compassion, and resolve conflicts constructively, processes empirically associated with the reduction of bullying and other manifestations of aggression. Complementarily, empathy-building exercises and inclusive curricular content support teachers in guiding learners toward tolerant and prosocial behavior (UNESCO, 2019, 2024). As Cristea (2010) observes, despite its still limited theoretical formalization and empirical substantiation, tolerance education constitutes a distinct dimension of the new pedagogical paradigm advanced by UNESCO in response to contemporary global challenges, particularly within the frameworks of education for democracy and human rights (as cited in urcan, 2015).

At the pre-service level, higher education institutions increasingly embed tolerance and peace education within their curricula, emphasizing intercultural competence, human rights education, and inclusive pedagogy (UNESCO, 2021). In-service teacher formation continues this trajectory by promoting experiential and reflective learning that strengthens conflict-resolution strategies and classroom management skills (UNICEF, 2017). As evidenced by the OECD (2020), teachers' sustained participation in structured SEL programs contributes to observable improvements in classroom climate, collective well-being, and the overall quality of interpersonal relations.

In line with the above, the *Comprehensive Strategy for Forming Pedagogical Tolerance*, aiming to develop teachers' attitudes, behaviors, and professional competencies to sustain an inclusive classroom climate, constitutes a valuable framework for teacher training in tolerance education amid rising student aggression in schools (urcan, 2015). Key components include curriculum integration through modules on the *Pedagogy of Tolerance*, experiential learning methods such as role-playing and reflection, and the development of professional competencies in empathy, active listening, and conflict resolution. Diagnostic tools and mentoring support are used to monitor teachers' progress, while institutional and community initiatives reinforce the internalization of these values.

The implementation of this strategy follows a structured process encompassing preparation, training, application, and sustainability phases. Expected outcomes include greater awareness of diversity, the demonstration of tolerant behaviors, and a more harmonious classroom climate. Central to this strategy is the *Theoretical Model of Pedagogical Tolerance* (urcan, 2015), which integrates affective-reflective, cognitive, and behavioral components. Internal pedagogical tolerance refers to a teacher's emotional and reflective attitudes, whereas external pedagogical tolerance encompasses professional knowledge and behavioral competencies. The model emphasizes the cultivation of an *emotional culture*, defined as the system of emotional knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that educators develop and manifest within the educational environment; it represents a model of social conduct (Borozan Maia (2015), as cited in urcan, 2015). This emotional culture shapes interpersonal relationships and influences the overall learning climate. The model further

identifies core values that sustain pedagogical tolerance, including psychological maturity, psychosocial resilience, acceptance of differences, and humanism. Teacher conduct becomes tolerant when constructive attitudes, essential capacities, and a solid knowledge base are systematically developed through both initial and continuous professional education (Türkan, 2015).

Pedagogical models designed to cultivate tolerance in education adopt diverse epistemological and methodological orientations, ranging from *Social and Emotional Learning* (SEL) frameworks to transformative, dialogic, and intercultural approaches. These models operationalize the relationship between teachers' emotional, cognitive, and ethical competences and the socialization of students into peaceful modes of interaction.

The SEL framework serves as a foundational approach, training teachers to foster self-awareness, empathy, and adaptive coping skills in learners. Murano et al. (2019, as cited in Tanyu et al., 2020) emphasize that educators must be adequately prepared, both at the pre-service and in-service stages, to embody the mindset and competencies that sustain these outcomes. SEL, as conceptualized by the OECD (2020) and UNESCO (2021), promotes the development of empathy, collaboration, and conflict-resolution capacities as integral components of the teaching profession.

Transformative and Peace Pedagogy, as articulated in UNESCO (2024b), engages students through dialogue, critical reflection, and civic participation, encouraging the non-violent resolution of conflicts. The *Transformative Pedagogy Approach for Peace, Resilience Building, Prevention of Violent Extremism, and Learning to Live Together* seeks to strengthen institutional capacity across ministries of education, teacher training institutes, and universities, thereby enabling the systematic delivery of inclusive and contextually relevant peace education. Through enhancing young people's knowledge and socio-emotional skills, the initiative aims to mitigate conflict, prevent violence, and sustain peacebuilding efforts across educational systems (UNESCO, 2024b). Within this paradigm, UNESCO's International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA, 2024) has advanced a model emphasizing teachers' capacity to promote dialogue, civic engagement, and non-violent interaction.

Parallel initiatives include UNICEF's (2019) *Life Skills and Citizenship Education (LSCE)* model, which, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, employs role-playing, cooperative learning, and reflective dialogue to foster prosocial behavior and reduce aggression. Similarly, *Dialogic Pedagogical Gatherings* (Olabarria et al., 2024) create spaces where literature and structured discussion enable both teachers and students to address issues of bullying, solidarity, and moral agency. Within such frameworks, teachers are trained in *bystander* and *upstander* strategies that empower students to intervene on behalf of peers, thereby transforming silence into proactive support (Olabarria et al., 2024). The *OECD (2020) Global Competence* model adds an intercultural dimension to tolerance education. Global competence, as defined within the PISA framework, comprises four interrelated dimensions, examining issues, understanding perspectives, interacting, and acting, each integrating knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. Globally competent individuals exhibit sensitivity to cultural variation in communicative behavior and intentionally adapt their interactional style to the social norms of others. They express their beliefs and negotiate differences with discernment and respect, demonstrating curiosity, empathy, and a genuine interest in alternative viewpoints (OECD, 2020).

Empirical evidence substantiates the efficacy of tolerance-oriented teacher formation. Studies consistently demonstrate that educators trained in SEL and related pedagogical

models foster measurable gains in students' emotional awareness, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills (UNESCO IICBA, 2024; UNICEF, 2017). Teachers participating in programs focused on resilience and emotional regulation report reductions in disciplinary incidents and enhanced peer support among students (OECD, 2020). Furthermore, UNESCO (2021) found that schools characterized by educators' emotional and intercultural competence display significant decreases in both verbal and physical aggression, suggesting that such competencies are not only desirable but essential for sustaining inclusive learning environments.

Other models focus on positive classroom management and peer support: for instance, teachers are trained to praise kindness as "cool" and to cultivate high-quality friendships among students (Olabarria et al., 2024). Many programs include training in inclusive teaching and conflict resolution – helping teachers learn to set classroom norms democratically, use problem-solving stories or role plays, and support diverse learners (Olabarria et al., 2024). UNICEF (2024) and OECD (2020) alike emphasize life-skills education, which integrates conflict-resolution, empathy and collaboration into everyday lessons. In practice, this involves research-based, activity-oriented methods (role-plays, group work, project learning) that make diversity a learning asset.

Conclusion

Global research converges on the understanding that systematic teacher formation in tolerance education, whether implemented during pre-service preparation or through in-service professional development, constitutes a decisive determinant of educational quality. By cultivating teachers' social-emotional, intercultural, and peace-building capacities, these programs not only enhance pedagogical effectiveness but also sustain the creation of classrooms that embody empathy, democratic participation, and peaceful coexistence (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2020; UNICEF, 2017; UNESCO IICBA, 2024). This study reaffirms that structured and reflective teacher training, grounded in experiential learning, critical reflection, and social and emotional learning, is a key mechanism for mitigating student aggression and fostering a culture of tolerance in educational environments. Educators equipped with emotional competence, conflict-resolution skills, and intercultural awareness become agents of transformation, capable of shaping classrooms as relational and ethical spaces grounded in safety, dialogue, and mutual respect. Integrating tolerance education throughout both pre-service and in-service programs ensures continuity between theoretical frameworks and pedagogical practice, promoting the development of teachers as reflective practitioners and moral exemplars of empathy, justice, and civic responsibility.

Institutional commitment emerges as an indispensable condition for sustainability. Educational policies should therefore embed modules on tolerance within professional standards, secure ongoing mentorship opportunities, and create supportive organizational environments that sustain teachers' psychological and professional well-being. Beyond preventing school violence or managing aggression, tolerance education functions as a formative process that empowers learners to engage peacefully and collaboratively within diverse societies, reinforcing the moral and civic fabric of education itself. Future research directions should include longitudinal and cross-cultural investigations to examine the sustained impact of tolerance-based teacher training on school climate, student behavior, and community cohesion, as well as its broader implications for educational practice and social development.

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