

Abu Dhabi Guidelines on Teaching Interfaith Tolerance

Education is a key tool in efforts to prevent the growth of intolerance. The United Nations reports that half of the world's population is under the age of 30, the largest youth demographic in history.¹ At the same time, people from different religions, ethnicities and cultures are inter-mixing as never before, which requires new approaches for teaching interfaith tolerance in the classroom. Evidence increasingly shows that respect for religious freedom and pluralism correlates with stable societies, respect for human rights, economic growth, resilient communities, and a reduction in conflict and violent extremism.²

The following guidelines emerged from discussions on 23-24 February 2019 in Abu Dhabi, during a meeting convened by the United Arab Emirates and the United States about promoting interfaith understanding and diversity, as well as fostering human rights and religious freedom, to combat extremism. Experts from around the world participated in the Abu Dhabi meeting, which included government experts, civil society thought leaders, and key religious figures. The discussions lead to the creation of these policy guidelines. Participants generally agreed that more must be done to improve learning outcomes for youth to increase their awareness about the world around them, to expand their understanding of different belief systems and practices, to foster an understanding of the importance of interfaith tolerance and respect of the rights of conscience for every individual, and to this end, to develop and implement education systems that promote peaceful and effective coexistence. The policy guidelines for government and civil society are divided into three main areas – Expanding, Equipping, and Empowering – as concrete areas to consider when teaching interfaith tolerance education to develop better global citizens

Expanding

Empower youth to better understand the world around them will help them successfully navigate an increasingly religiously and ethnically diverse future in their own countries and abroad. Finding ways to improve learning outcomes and expand the knowledge of students about different faiths, without indoctrination, and to build positive relationships with youth from different faiths and cultures, should be a part of any quality education. There is a need to expand formal and informal learning opportunities in interfaith tolerance and respect to build understanding and acceptance of diversity, as well as social cohesion, which is foundational to stable, peaceful, plural, and prosperous societies. Expanding these opportunities can be done through:

¹ <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2015/04/10-things-didnt-know-worlds-population/>

² <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/21/global-uptick-in-government-restrictions-on-religion-in-2016/>

- Knowledge about religion, belief, and nonbelief systems found around the world and in a student's home country can positively reinforce appreciation of the intrinsic human dignity of all persons, combat extremism and negative stereotyping, and decrease the likelihood of violence towards "the other."
- Teaching students about human rights and freedom of religion or belief can promote stronger social cohesion by ensuring students understand that all individuals carry these rights as equals.
- Students who achieve a greater multicultural awareness will more likely appreciate a country's diverse past and protect civic space for diversity of beliefs and practices. Interfaith and tolerance education can also help people of all ages better understand their own local social, cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity.
- Through interfaith and tolerance education, young people can develop the skills and attitudes they need to engage in constructive dialogue, face disagreement without threat of or threatening violence, and learn peaceful approaches to change and diversity.
- Youth who have expanded interfaith skills, learned and utilized both inside and outside of the classroom, will be better prepared to develop positive relationships with those from different religions and backgrounds.
- Where conflict has occurred between different religious and ethnic groups, adding an emphasis on reconciliation that addresses the cultural, social, economic, political and religious sources of intolerance can assist students and teachers in moving forward and overcoming differences between communities. Remembering atrocities against religious minorities can also foster understanding and sympathy.
- By including minority perspectives in educational discussions, students encounter a wider range of issues; with proper training, this can result in a more balanced and tolerant view of how to live together with differences.

Equipping

The impartial and respectful teaching about different religions, beliefs and cultures is critical for an effective classroom environment. For students to expand their knowledge about other faiths and cultures, teachers need to be equipped with the training and resources to appropriately guide discussions that promote interreligious understanding, dialogue, tolerance, and human rights. In addition, curricula must provide positive information about different faith and belief communities and combat negative stereotypes of the other. Some suggestions for how to equip those with the resources needed are:

- Quality teaching materials are critical, and evaluating existing curricula being used in schools will ensure they promote respect for religious diversity, interfaith tolerance, and human rights and freedom of religion or belief.

- Inclusivity is important in developing learning materials that foster peaceful and effective coexistence, and the process of creating accurate curricula devoid of negative stereotyping should involve the communities discussed in developing how their history and beliefs are described.
- Classroom environments set an important tone in fostering interfaith tolerance, so successful teaching practices coherent with promoting such attitudes will utilize approaches that highlight acceptance, open-mindedness and coexistence such as dialogue, ethical decision making and critical thinking.
- Strong teacher training methodologies and educational requirements can help build classroom environments inclusive of diverse voices, including minorities, and thus more conducive to learning about other faiths. A positive environment will also promote interfaith tolerance and human dignity, as well as knowledge on human rights and religious freedom.
- Establishing national textbook and curricula standards that actively promote tolerance towards all persons, as well as creating appropriate review and enforcement mechanisms to ensure the meeting of such standards, can improve learning outcomes about interfaith tolerance.
- When problems are found, it is key to quickly replace textbooks with improved materials that exclude messages of intolerance, exclusion, hatred, discrimination or violence against any group of persons based on religion or other differences.
- Outside of the classroom, equipping teachers and other instructors with the tools they need to engage youth in informal learning environments can maximize learning and ensure the extracurricular learning environment models these desired outcomes.

Empowering

Article 26(2) of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights states, “Education shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.” Educating youth to live together in diversity and respect and to share interfaith experiences can play a critical role in building resistance to extremist narratives, promoting peace and stability, and reducing violent conflict. A new global commitment is required to meet this challenge, one that will work to develop holistic education systems that promote interfaith tolerance to combat violent extremism.

- Strong partnerships are needed between government, international organizations, civil society, parents’ associations, and religious leaders to ensure expansion of interfaith knowledge among students and the effective equipping of teachers.

- Guidelines and recommendations from variety of international organizations and non-governmental organizations, such as the [OSCE](#), the [Council of Europe](#), [UNESCO](#), as well as [Hedayah](#) and the [Tony Blair Institute](#), provide good examples for steps to take.
- New resources, both financial and technical, are needed to support training of teachers and expansion of curricula to enhance teaching of interfaith tolerance and understanding.
- International encouragement of governments to promote interfaith understanding through education to combat extremism, at both federal and local levels, is needed to see a positive change in textbooks and classroom methodologies.
- Greater encouragement of parents to be involved in the educational process of their children is needed, which reflects their right to transmit their religious values to their children and promotes freedom of religion or belief.
- Positive engagement by national and international partners of formal and informal educational institutions at all levels is needed to advance interfaith understanding and knowledge about human rights and religious freedom.