# Educational Encounters and Interreligious Education: A Latvian Case Study for Expanding the Borders of Hospitality

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## Introduction

The context of Latvia is marked by the reality of religious diversity. In Latvia people with different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds encounter each other in everyday life and share their experience. Formerly fixed borders between ethnic groups are gradually dissolving after the break of the Soviet Union, but new, simultaneously confirming and excluding barriers are being set up. People themselves create and maintain borders and contribute to separation between diverse communities.

This chapter discusses the issue of hospitality toward the other in society and religious education in Latvia. The experience that religious education can provide for teaching religious otherness can serve as a powerful tool for deepening one's particular faith. The premise is that religious education is explicitly interreligious. The chapter highlights the challenges for the educator in building a classroom practice and curriculum inclusive of diverse cultural, social, and religious perspectives that would challenge the boundaries built by different religious, ethnical, social, and cultural communities. Thus, it challenges educators to implement a pedagogy of dialog and to create optimal conditions for children to acquire knowledge and skill of how to live in a sustainable society founded on respect toward the other, economic justice, and human rights. The imperative is to recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures, religions, and life forms, "we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny" (*The Earth Charter*, 2000).

This study aims to explore teachers' self-identification and to measure teacher's social distance toward diverse groups of population in Latvia. It was originally designed by E. Bogardus (*Social Distance Scale* ($N = 187$), 1975), but modified for the purpose of the study.

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## The Context

Latvian society can be described as multicultural. In the modern world it is impossible to find a country where the population is comprised of only one ethnic, linguistic, and religious entity. Latvia is no exception; it is inhabited by people of many different backgrounds. Latvia is also a religiously diverse country. Within contemporary Latvia several equally strong religious denominations coexist. While Latvia is a strong Christian state, there is a significant number of atheists. As well, there was a large Jewish community which was destroyed in the Holocaust during German occupation. In Latvia there are three dominant religious denominations: Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Orthodox Christianity. Other denominations include Baptists, Pentecostals, and Evangelical Protestants. A variety of religious traditions and worldviews also have taken their position in the everyday life of contemporary Latvians.

Latvia is inhibited by people of many different ethnic backgrounds: Latvians, Russians, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians, Gypsies, Armenians, and others. Ethnic minorities do not form compact areas of settlement in any territory or town in Latvia. Thus, people of different ethnic origin experience frequent contact on a daily basis. These contacts create the specific nature of Latvia's multicultural society. Individuals live in and between many different cultures and identities. While cultures have things in common, diverse life experiences and perceptions result in individuals developing a range of cultural understandings and behaviors. By Wenger's term, society in Latvia can be described as "a nexus of multimembership" (1998, p. 159). There are no sharp boundaries between different identities of the individual. The notion of "nexus" does not describe merging separate identities; neither does it decompose one's identity into a distinct trajectory. While "in a nexus, multiple trajectories become part of each other, whether they clash or reinforce each other" (Wenger, 1998, p. 159). Latvia is characterized by a high number of ethnically mixed marriages. Every fifth Latvian entering a marriage has a partner of minority origin.

But, Latvian society cannot be described as tolerant and peaceful. Studies carried out in Latvia demonstrate that the most common forms of intolerance are related to ethnic origin and religious affiliation. While there has been some progress toward integration and inter-ethnic relations, there still remains a great deal of resentment on the part of ethnic Russians toward Latvia's citizenship and language policies.

Latvia's inhabitants display stereotypes and prejudices toward Gypsies (*European Value Study*, 1999). According to the data provided by the study, 27.2% of the respondents would not like to have Gypsies as neighbors, and 14.5% of respondents would not choose to live next door to Muslims (*European Values Study*, 1999). Public opinion also demonstrates that there exists intolerance toward such social groups as sexual minorities, HIV patients, and people with special needs.

The *Constitution of the Republic of Latvia* (1922) contains a general prohibition of any form of discrimination. Article 91 of the Constitution declares, "All human beings in Latvia shall be equal before the law and the court. Human rights shall be realized without discrimination of any kind." However, Latvia has not developed

comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation covering all spheres of life. Article 91 of the constitution does not provide effective protection of rights, especially in cases of indirect discrimination in the private sector.

## Theoretical Background

There are many instruments being designed that measure intercultural competence and sensitivity. One of the commonly referred models is Dr. Milton Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity. Bennett suggests a model of six stages (denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, integration) of increasing sensitivity toward cultural difference. These stages indicate a move from "ethnocentrism" to some way of "ethno relativism" that allows an individual's culture to be experienced in the context of other cultures.

Denial, defense, and minimization stages are related to exclusiveness and imply staying apart from others. These stages mean deliberate excluding of particular individuals or groups of people from consideration. Exclusion may be a consequence of ethnocentrism in which the outsider is viewed as inherently inferior (a minimization stage according to Bennett).

Acceptance, adaptation, and integration are related to inclusiveness, which involves such aspects as diversifying, empathizing, and caring. Acceptance means realizing the commonality of all community and becoming aware of shared problems and issues. At this stage the self is capable of reaching out, including and integrating others, as well as separating and excluding. Integration denotes making linkages to others and to broader societies. This stage is also referred to as "advanced intercultural competence" (Cross, 1988). Sue et al. (1998) were the first to outline the core of intercultural competence, which comprises awareness, knowledge, and skills. Multicultural awareness involves a belief that differences are valuable and that learning about others who are culturally different is necessary in teacher training. It also implies an individual's willingness to change her or his own values, assumptions, and biases; a belief in the value of one's own cultural heritage; an acceptance of other worldviews; and willingness to acknowledge that one does not have all the right answers (Pope & Reynolds, 1997). Multicultural knowledge encompasses knowing one's own culture and other cultures and knowledge about how gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and disability affect one's experience. Multicultural skills involve the ability to openly discuss cultural differences, a capacity to genially connect with individuals who are different from themselves, and the ability to challenge the individuals and make sensitive interventions (Pope & Reynolds, 1997).

Extensivity as the inclusion or exclusion at its extreme toward the others implies two dimensions: the attachment which ranges from alienation on the one hand, and acceptance on the other hand. In between each pole there is a broad continuum reflecting varying intensities of detachment and attachment, as well as various degrees of inclusiveness or exclusiveness. Anthias (2002) suggests the term "translocational positionality" that refers to the interlocking and potentially

contradictory positions in relation to social, religious, and other aspects of identity. The term refers also to the complex nature of positionality faced by those who are at the interplay of a range of locations and dislocations in relation to ethnicity, national belonging, class, and religion. The proximity to the other is never static, but is determined by shifting social and cultural practices.

## Dialogical Self

Psychologists show an increasing interest in self study from the perspective of dialog and multivoicedness (Gergen, 1991; Hermans, 1996; Raggatt, 2000). They claim that self cannot be defined as an isolated unity, but rather as a highly open, dynamic, multivoiced dialogical, heterogeneous, and decentralized self. Multiple voices of "self" accompany and oppose one another in a dialogical way. Each individual lives in a multiplicity of worlds, thus creating a highly dynamic and complex organization of self. Dynamic multiplicity of I-positions enters into a dialogical position with different others (Wenger, 1998). While entering into dialogical relations with others, new meanings are being created between positions of different others. As a result of interchange, a new position can be introduced into an existing repertory. Dialogical self is constantly challenged by questions, disagreements, conflicts, negotiations, and confrontations. The capacity of self-renewal allows the self to engage in an active process of positioning and repositioning (Hermans, 1999). As Gergen (1991) suggests, an individual is faced with an intensified flow of positions moving in and out of the self-space within relatively short time periods. In the dialogical self the positions are not necessarily intersubjectively related, but may differ in their dominance, for example, the position of the individuals toward their culture, religion, and sexual identity. The self is located in several positions in space, moving back and forward among them. Therefore, the self can be seen as highly dynamic unity. The embodied person is spatially located with other human beings.

The same refers to a changing nature of ethnical and national minority. The concept of ethnicity is very complex and open for the debate. Ethnic groups have "a common ancestry marked by some form of cultural continuity which distinguishes them from other groups" (Jackson, 2002, p. 83). Ethnicity denotes "a group of people who perceive themselves and are perceived by others as sharing cultural traits such as, language, religion, family customs, and food preference" (Ore, 2000, p. 9).

Ethnical identity also carries dialogical nature and situational character. Some groups rediscover their ethnical symbols as a result of being marginalized by more powerful groups. Jackson (2002) also points to a contextual and shifting nature of ethnic identity, and refers to radical positions of postmodernist thinkers who see ethnicity as an oppressive social construction or forms of "super-ethnic" nationalism in which ethnic distinctions are seen as assimilation ("the melting pot") (2004, p. 15). The same refers to national identity. Similarly, Smith (1991) views national identity as a combination of ethnic, political, and civic elements. As a result of globalization, identity has a fluid and shifting nature, and religious identity has a

complex and denominational character. As the president of Latvian Academy of Sciences, Jānis Stradiņš, characterizes it, “During the course of centuries, the quite complicated relations of our nation and religious beliefs have been interwoven with national, social, and even economic and political motifs” (1996, p. 75). For an example, he mentions the differences between Christian values and national awakening, and Christian values and the ideas of atheistic socialism. For centuries, Latvians still kept alive their pre-Christian religion, old mythology, folklore, and deities as some sort of inner resistance against foreign invaders. The world of pre-Christian religion, mythology, and folklore is still alive in Latvian culture and religion. Therefore, researchers refer to religious syncretism in Latvia.

## Research Methodology

For the purpose of identifying respondents’ attitude toward different groups of population both as close and remote neighbors, that is, representatives of different cultures, religions, and worldviews (e.g., representatives of Eastern religions (Hindu, Buddhism, etc.), the author used Emory Bogardus’ (1975) *Social Distance Scale*. The extensivity of respondents’ possible relatedness toward diverse groups of people as close relatives, friends, neighbors, colleagues, the citizen of the country, and tourists were examined. Repeated studies carried out by Bogardus in the United States indicate a slightly decreasing social distancing and fewer distinctions being made among groups. A similar study was carried out by the *European Values Study* in 1999 in Latvia. This study revealed that people perceived themselves as being most distant from people with deviant social behavior (alcoholics, drug addicts, people with criminal past), while racial, ethnic, and religious affiliation, in turn, was not so important to them.

Bogardus’ scale is a psychological testing scale created to empirically measure respondents’ willingness to participate in social contacts of varying degrees of closeness with members of diverse social groups such as racial, religious, ethnic group, and sexual minorities. Social distance refers to the degrees of understanding and feeling that persons experience regarding each other. The scale measures the extent to which respondents would be accepting of each group. It is a cumulative scale (a Guttman scale) because agreement with any item implies agreement with all preceding items. The scale has been criticized as too simple because social distance in intimate relations may not be related to attitudes concerning far-away contacts, such as citizens or visitors in one’s country. Neither does this scale measure all nuances and degrees of social distance.

Participants of this research were asked to identify themselves with the suggested categories (representative from the dominant culture, ethnic minorities, citizens of the country, Europeans, Christians, Muslims, people with special needs, and sexual minorities) and rank their self-identification. Afterwards, the author examined correlation among self-identification of respondents and the social distance the respondents display toward diverse groups of population.

## Participants and Procedure

Research participants consisted of under-graduate and graduate students from a university situated in the Eastern part of Latvia as well from its branches situated in four regions of the country. All participants are teachers who chose an introductory course on Multicultural education ($N = 187$).

The items on the demographic indicators specified each participant's age, gender, and respondents' ethnicity. Respondents' age varied from 19 to 68. Students' ethnicity was as follows: Latvians (71%), others (29%). Among the respondents there were 87% female and 13% male respondents. The disproportional selection of respondents according to gender can be explained since education is mainly a sphere of work chosen by women. Religious background of the participants comprised the following: Christians (98%) and atheists (2%). Among Christian respondents there were 56% of Catholics, 19% Russian orthodox believers, 20% Lutherans, 2% Old believers, 1% Baptists. There were 24% of all the respondents who claimed they were living in a monocultural environment, while 74% claimed to live in a multicultural environment. The teachers enrolled in this study are either students of Master or Bachelor study programs or graduates of secondary school. Verbal consent was obtained from all the respondents to participate in this study before they filled in a survey. Each participant was given instruction on how to complete the survey, and the survey data was collected by the author.

Respondents were asked to identify a social distance toward diverse groups of population (religious, ethnic groups, people with disabilities, sexual minorities, and national minority groups). The survey covered seven different relationships: ("close relationships," "as a close friend," "as a neighbor," "as a colleague," "as a permanent resident," "as a tourist," "should not be let into the country at all"). Participants were asked to evaluate social distance toward persons of different cultural, religious, and social backgrounds. Afterwards, research data was discussed with the respondents of the study.

Validity of respondents' self-assessment of their social distance toward diverse groups is open to debate. Respondents relied on their own assumptions and standards against which to judge their levels of sensitivity and proximity. Some of them might have underrated their social distance. As with any type of survey, responses may reflect respondents' desire to appear competent rather than otherwise.

The study has several limitations. Although the sample was large, it still may not be generalized to all teachers. Also, the present study is limited to self-reported data from teachers and does not include all cultural and religious groups. The choice of cultural, social, and religious groups for this study was purposely selected to represent the groups that cause the most discussion and negative sentiments among the population in Latvia.

Finally, several indicators suggested for the participants' description are very subjective, as for example, whether the living environment of participants is monocultural or multicultural.

## Research Findings

Participants of the study were asked to identify themselves among the suggested groups of diverse individuals. Of all Latvian respondents of the study, 52% identified themselves belonging to the dominant group (Latvians) in the country, while the highest indicator of self-identification among the representatives from the other ethnic groups was with one's own ethnic group (49%). The second highest indicator of self-identification among Latvians was to one's own ethnic group. The other ethnic groups see themselves as an integral part of the Latvian nation (18%), but for them identification with their own ethnic groups is much stronger (49%) than with the dominant group. Much educational and political work needs to be done to strengthen the citizenship of ethnic minorities. Ethnic identification was more important to male (46%) and younger respondents (39%) compared to the female respondents (29%) and older (35–68) respondents (23%).

The third highest indicator of self-identification among all respondents was religion. Both Latvian respondents (14.9%) and others (19%) identified themselves as Christians. Religious identification is stronger among those in the 19–34 age group, as well as female respondents. Latvia is a strong Christian country. There is a recession of religious practice in Latvia, but religious identification remains among the strongest indicators of self-identification. In the post-Soviet period religious life acquired new intensity, and people were eager to read religious philosophy and take part in Church rituals. Since then, the religious life of people was cultivated in the families of believers. A large part of society has been deprived of any information about the values of Christianity, had no religious experience, and was unaware of the essence of religious rites. Still, the atheism of the Soviet period disappeared with the political changes because it did not penetrate the profoundest layers of consciousness and life values of the largest part of the Latvian population. Later, after the wave of religious revival, traditional religions lost the power to compel people. As Kule (2002) comments, traditional religions gradually turned into "a museum of culture rather than a gateway to an everlasting life" (p. 176). Some people became interested in the exotic nature of Buddhism and New Age Movement.

The representatives of national minorities identified themselves as Europeans (13%) rather than as citizens of their country of birth (32%). The Latvian respondents identified themselves more as citizens of their own country (55%) rather than as Europeans (6%).

When it comes to marriage and relationships, the Latvians have no reservations to enter marriage or to establish close relationships with Latvians, Russians, Europeans, Christians, that is, people from their closest neighborhood. They claim that they have good relationships with Europeans and Christians. They alienate themselves from Muslims and sexual minorities. A majority of respondents insist that Muslims should not be permitted to enter Latvia. However, it should be pointed out that this is an analysis of attitude not behavior. In order to speak about racial or religious discrimination, it is necessary to analyze people's behavior. These respondents may not have encountered diverse religious groups or have gained negative images and stereotypical messages from mass media and their

socialization in families and the society. The respondents do not want to see Muslims as a religious group in their country and placed them on the extreme side of the scale of social distance or exclusion. Negative attitudes toward groups such as sexual minorities were expressed by 93% of respondents. Their beliefs may reflect either physical or social isolation from people of the particular group. This is especially difficult for individuals who claim ultimacy and completeness of their views to accept the possibility or even probability that their interpreted view is partial, incomplete, or even wrong.

A distinct mistrust of immigrants was indicated by 94% of respondents. They would not like to see them in Latvia neither as permanent residents nor as tourists. Due to the demographic changes that took place in Latvia as a result of migration during the Soviet occupation, there exists a distinct mistrust toward potential immigrants. Although a migration wave is a part of the global processes that are taking place in Latvia after its accession in European Union, data on current manifestations of intolerance provided by this study as well as by the study completed by various research institutes in Latvia reveal clear signs of intolerance such as xenophobia toward people of different skin color and religious backgrounds (*Cultural Diversity and Tolerance in Latvia*, 2003).

As the data suggest,there is no major difference in responses of Latvians and other groups. All respondents place Muslims and sexual minorities on the margins of the scale of social distance. They are willing to see representatives of Eastern religions, Muslims, and sexual minorities only as tourists in Latvia. This can be explained by negative images teachers gain from mass media as well as from lack of encounter with these groups. There are no signs of overt discrimination toward ethnic minorities. All respondents are willing to see them as colleagues. The people of Latvia still have a long way to go to learn to show a more inclusive attitude toward people with special needs.

There are no conspicuous differences in the responses of respondents between their self-identification and their position and the distance toward diverse groups of people.

There are also no big differences in teachers' responses toward diverse groups of the population. Respondents who identified themselves as Christians claimed to display close relationships toward other Christians and people with special needs. Female respondents display closer relatedness toward representatives of Christian groups, people with special needs, and ethnic groups compared to the responses of male respondents. There is almost no difference in teachers' responses who identified themselves belonging to a monocultural or multicultural environment.

## Implications for Teacher Training

Teaching should begin with the experiences and assumptions of students in order to be sensitive to different ways of thinking. Thus, teachers need to adopt a dialogical approach – dialog between students, between students and the material, as well between the students and the teacher (Jackson, 2004).

One of the pedagogical strategies for building dialogical classroom environments is diversifying, that is, enlarging the groups of people with whom students usually interact in their closest environment. Students will perceive others more likely as similar under conditions that support reducing negative stereotypes and promoting positive interactions.

Learning about other groups will help in diversifying one's orientations. Such learning will be beneficial if it encompasses both characteristics that indicate a shared humanity as well as the conditions that make the group distinct. Learning about other cultural, religious, or minority groups will provide opportunities to discover commonalities and distinctions viewed from the perspective of one's own group as well from the perspective of other groups.

Teachers need to be self-reflective and seek to understand their own presuppositions and assumptions. For example, Freire (1973) suggested a method of codification and dialog that rests on viewing both students and teachers as subjects, creators of meaning, both engaged in the task of understanding their own consciousness and the world. This theory relies on the recognition of each individual's ability to appropriate reality through naming, reading, and thus knowing that reality (Freire, 1973).

Teachers need to be critical thinkers in designing their curriculum and classroom activities: This includes

- helping students to develop a strong cultural identity, awareness of one's own roots, cultural heritage, one's role as a member of a larger earth community;
- developing a sense of solidarity of those who are needy and less fortunate;
- fostering students to become critical thinkers; as well as
- active participants in promoting the ideals of sustainable world.

These tasks can be reached by

- helping students to locate their existence in broader systems;
- exploring other ways of thinking and doing;
- providing space for sharing stories in the classroom; and
- "defining a trajectory that connects what one is doing to an expanded aspect of identity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 185).

This requires teachers' critical reflectivity on how their curriculum supports

- participation of all students in the school and a wider community;
- the use of school's cultural and religious diversity as a resource;
- fostering negotiated decision-making process in the classroom;
- acting toward bringing about a society that is socially just;
- promoting cooperative learning;
- teachers' efforts in challenging the content that is monocultural, monoreligious, and disrespectful to other cultures and religions;
- creating freedom for teachers in selecting materials;

- allowing a flexible time-frame for pupils with diverse needs; and
- taking into account content relevant to children's lives, cultural, and religious backgrounds.

By evaluating the context of what they are teaching and the textbook materials, teachers need to pay close attention whether

- the content is culturally sensitive,
- it reflects an awareness of the diversity of cultures,
- it contains inclusive language,
- the content reflects the experiences of people from a wide range of backgrounds,
- it reflects cultural and religious biases, and
- the content includes contributions of people from a range of cultural backgrounds.

This requires willingness, freedom, energy, and time to expose oneself to new identities and relationships. This means recognizing diversity as a value. Pedagogy of hospitality requires reminding oneself that

> Each cultural expression of truth . . . is a large piece of the complete puzzle of God and humanity, but no one piece alone gives us a complete picture. A more complete picture of the true, the good, and beautiful comes through when pieces are together in their proper interconnectedness. Yet the fullness of the mystery of God and of humanity will still lie beyond our human understanding . . .. In the puzzle all pieces are of equal importance. Only when they are joined together, the whole makes sense (Elizondo, 1997, p. 398).

## Toward Pedagogy of Dialog

A classroom as a dialogical community should be inclusive toward individuals of diverse ethnic, racial, gender, or other identification. Such befriending acknowledges and accepts differences, or, as Palmer writes,

> The stranger, the alien, the enemy – anyone who is different than I am – poses an unspoken question to me, in fact to both of us. The question is why I am as I am, and why is she as she is? Her life is a possibility for both of us. The difference and perhaps the tension between us is an opening into new possibilities for us. Differences are manifestations of Otherness. They are invitations to be led out, to be educated (as cited in O'Gorman, 1989, p. 15).

The task of building dialogical classroom community of learners can be reached by fostering the value of presence and receptivity, hospitality, and care (Harris, 1989). The philosopher, Marcel (1987) describes the meaning of presence as "something which can be revealed as a look, a smile, an intonation or a handshake" (as cited in Harris, 1989, p. 86).

Receptivity is the ability to listen not only to those persons who are oppressed, but also to the voice of the entire Creation, and facing that reality as a "Thou." It leads toward listening to and including the voices of non-human world, thus, implying a planetary perspective. Hospitality, as Durka (2002) argues, is the feature that is easiest to recognize in the classroom setting. She highlights that when hospitality

is not "merely a superficial acceptance that glosses over differences" but is offered authentically and is born out of a deep commitment to the search for truth, it offers an opportunity for students to engage in deep conversation with one another, and to affirm: "I am glad to be here." (p. 46). Such a warm and welcoming environment of acceptance "generates deep conversations and good questions," and helps in "building bridges among students" (p. 46). Derrida (2003) points to the danger of conditional hospitality that serves as an invitation of the powerful or privileged one's to set the gathering place for the least powerful. Derrida (2003) invites practicing unconditional hospitality as "visitation" to the unknown places and spaces (p. 125).

The pedagogy of hospitality assumes the possibility of dialog as it denotes being oriented to other and the practical accomplishments of articulation. As Anthias (2002) argues, dialog means "going beyond merely seeing the other person's point of view" and entails "going beyond one's point of view so that both parties shift their position, not coming closer to each other but developing an alternative vision which is transformative" (p. 282).

Dialog means finding a creative and sustainable balance or interaction between dominant values and openness to even contradictory values. There is a widespread tendency in Latvia to stereotype other religious and cultural communities, usually focusing on their worst features. By developing dialog with religion and culture of others along with one's own, one can begin to experience one's sense of connectedness with human diversity. As Veverka (2004) stresses, a dialog with others is "an existential act," where encounter with others alert one to the spiritual depth, power, and beauty in different religious traditions as well as confronts one with the darkest side of one's own.

Only a dialog with worldviews of different others can deepen and strengthen students' own religious, cultural, ethnic, and other understandings. Pedagogy of dialog involves listening to the concerns and questions of students and treating them seriously and with respect. This means making meaning from what is said without preconceiving ideas of what is correct or appropriate. Listening is a metaphor for openness to others, sensitivity to listen and to be listened to. Behind each act of listening there are emotions, openness to differences, to different values and points of view. Therefore, teachers need to listen and give value to the differences, the points of view of others, while remembering that behind each act of listening there is creativity and interpretations on both parts. Listening means giving value to the other, even if not agreed. As Emila Reggio argues, competent listening creates a deep opening and predisposition toward change (as cited in Rinaldi, 2003, p. 140).

## Concluding Remarks

The pluralistic world is becoming increasingly complex with divergent and often contradictory demands on the individual. Therefore, educators should not condition the student to particular lifestyles that stifle creativity, homogenize thinking, narrow choices, and limit autonomous thinking, but, rather, educate students who are able

to participate in problem solving and decision making. Universities should develop competencies in their students which will enable them to cope with uncertainty, ambiguous defined situations, and conflicting norms and values.

One of the greatest damages a school can do is to embed a "culture of normality" that can lead toward fundamentalism where differences are seen as factors that divide, separate, and isolate. In their life span individuals tend to develop a concept of certain "others" who are less valued, who are worth less than they are, and their difference is seen as something negative, and therefore to be rejected, eliminated, or negated. Instead, the school needs to become a place that enables students' willingness to act. It should offer spaces where there is openness to experimentation, continuous reflection, critique, and argumentation, as well as the crossing of boundaries. Inclusion should become a part of the school's policymaking process that should foster teachers' searching for better ways of responding to diversity. Teachers need to teach students to live with difference and to learn how to learn from difference. The task of the educator is to allow the differences to be expressed, negotiated, and nurtured through exchange of ideas. As well, the teacher should provide space to express the difference and to develop skills to be receptive to the differences of others. Dealing with differences means approaching each individual in terms of his/her background and personal story. This includes listening to the differences, reevaluating any truth that one can consider being absolute, "giving value to negotiation as a strategy of the possibility" (Rinaldi, 2003, p. 140).

The role of teachers is to encourage a genuine dialog that extends beyond tolerance, that is, accepting the other as an equally entitled partner in dialog. Acceptance and coexistence would be more preferable terminology in striving for shared humanity. The pressing challenge for educators is to create optimal conditions for the education of children who grow up in the culturally diverse society so as to encourage them to participate and contribute to the future of a sustainable society. Thus, religious education can best be achieved in dialog, not isolation, and a pedagogy of interreligious hospitality (Switzer, 2006) can become authentic in Latvia, for it offers a model for deeper understanding of the other.

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