

## **Alphabet of Tolerance**

*Name of organization:*

**“Hajde da...”**

(Contact details: Address of Group "Let's." Knez Danilova 12, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia.  
[hajdeda@eunet.rs](mailto:hajdeda@eunet.rs) ; [www.hajdeda.org.rs](http://www.hajdeda.org.rs))

### **About the program „Alphabet of Tolerance“ - few examples and one workshop scenario**

Program „Alphabet of Tolerance“ has been a specific inducement from its first moments, both for children participants and teachers. The Program is considerably challenging for teachers being put in the role of facilitator, which requires new skills and attitude different from usual one, present during typical classes. It is not uncommon that workshop process provokes very intensive emotions for children. In such moments teachers need a lot of skill in order to keep the focus and to facilitate participants' discussion on relevant topics in the same time.

Considering issues of discrimination, isolation and lack of understanding, it is important to call attention to the fact that during realization of the Program children-participants state examples of unequal rights, unbalanced opportunities from their own experience. With the course of the Program they bring forward more and more such situations, when they had been deprived of opportunity to express their capacities, fulfill their potentials and had been excluded from discussions on topics relevant for them. Children often mention examples of social, psychological and physical violence, as well. Origins were different, but the issues of different background and nationality are somehow always a trigger for strong emotions and tempestuous debates.

The everlasting dilemma participants have to deal with is ability of this (or similar) program to induce certain change in (social) behavior of children and adults. Is it possible that person's previous experience is so dominant and bounding that there is absolutely no way to induce new attitude and behavior through recent experience? If so, can we ever do anything else but jump to conclusions, on the basis of preceding experience, disregarding reality of new situations?

Considerable number of schools, being strengthened by the Program, managed to conduct the search for answers to these important questions.

#### **Rewind – Two thefts incident**

An interesting affair occurred in one class conducted by a teacher who had been participant of our education. Certain girl, from not so well-off family, was caught red-handed in the act of thievery. Expectedly, punishment followed. This girl had been unpopular before this incident and now she was getting even less positive interactions with other children. She was more or less excluded from communication. After several months new theft occurred. Of course, everyone was pointing to our young protagonist. She was desperately trying to prove that she had nothing to do with it and that on previous occasion she had learned her lesson. The teacher tried to moderate the communication in the class, but results were poor. The girl was labeled 'guilty' by class mates and they even physically attacked her on her way home.

We analyzed this situation during our supervisory meeting. Teachers (previously educated to conduct workshops with children) tried to identify potential positive responds to such situation. Some propositions were brought forward and the teacher of respective class explored them all with the intention to determine the most adequate one, considering structure of her class. In following days, she tried out several different approaches and interventions. She encouraged children to search for facts, instead of relying to pre-defined opinions. After some time, children started to relativise interpretation of this event. They were able to have straightforward discussion about girl's previous behavior, keeping in mind possibility that someone else could have done it on second occasion. Few weeks later actual 'performer' of the act was discovered. So we can see, mistakes are possible and even common; but it's important not to forget that such mistakes can be opportunity for development if they are fully understood. It was important lesson both for this girl and all of her class mates. Activity of the teacher, as a workshop conductor, was entirely focused on rewinding the process of judgment, labeling and violence and thus to open new perspectives to situation which seemed to be so evident at the beginning.

### **Equal chances – Drama class example**

We are not able to decide whether someone will or will not make the most of her/his rights, but it is certainly our obligation to provide equal rights for everyone. One of situations we had to deal with was the issue of admittance of one Roma girl in school drama class. If other children - members of drama class - take the premise her capacities are poor as a starting point (which is very common prejudice regarding Roma children), they will a priori reject the possibility of her joining the group. But, if initial idea is that everyone has the right to try, there's a possibility of having the great new actress for following school play. We cannot say whether she will use opportunity or not, but important thing is that she had one.

This particular situation was discussed during the workshop. Many children were hesitant. Some were extremely rigid and stood firmly on the position that 'we cannot let everyone join the group just because she/he feels like acting'. Subsequent process conducted in work with children was completely focused on identifying children's expectations from Roma girl and their concerns regarding cooperation with her. Major apprehension was that she's not able to cope with the practice and fit in and, consequently, that she would somehow ruin the play. Children were not convinced that she had necessary capabilities. As soon as the difference between uncertainty about someone's abilities and claim about her/his inability was established, great new horizon

emerged and change was no longer impossible. Scenario for one episode of animated series “It’s so unfair!” was based on this occurrence. This animated series had been created and realized by “Hajde da...” Group in 2004 and won award of Council of Europe and European Commission in the competition for campaign “Dosta/Enough” in 2006.

### **Encouragement for teachers**

In order to conduct this process of reconsidering existing ‘truths’ about others in work with children it is vital to encourage teachers to re-evaluate their own prejudice. Since we were engaged in education in southern Serbia, with ethnically mixed population, we decided to form the group of both Serbian and Albanian participants. There was a lot of pressure and anxiety at the beginning and it wasn’t easy at all to make teachers speak freely. On the surface, everything seemed right. But we were not willing to tolerate that complex atmosphere of uneasiness in the group. We asked them to help us understand social context they live in and expected behavior towards ‘different’ persons within their particular communities. We found out that they had to put up with a lot of pressure every time they show tendency to communicate with members of other ethnic group. There is clear division between Serbian and Albanian communities in that area. We also found out about difficult circumstance for women in conservative communities and the fear they have regarding their safety. For the first time, members of these two ethnic groups had opportunity to realize that very similar difficulties exist in both communities and as a result, mutual understanding and acceptance were improved. For some participants, this positive change meant improvement of attitude towards ‘different’ persons in everyday situations. One of participants stated that she was encouraged by this workshop to visit the shop she had been avoiding before, since it was owned by people from another ethnic group. Her experience was especially pleasant, so she decided to make further positive changes in her behavior.

### **„Magic wand“**

However, this Program is not the magic wand. It brings results whenever it’s realized in decent conditions – this means school directory and teachers included in education process have to be willing and ready to conduct changes. Support from principal and the rest of the teachers is invaluable for participants. It is also important that children’s behavior which we offer alternatives for does not require different type of professional treatment (e.g. psychotherapy treatment). This program was unable to bring considerable improvement in work with children needing individual therapy and with pathological behavior. Still, the Program is very efficient in situations where greater cohesion among school mates can be achieved through clarification of certain notions, understanding of person’s different positions and particular situations one can be put in.

### **Workshops based on experiential learning**

Program “Alphabet of Tolerance” is based on experiential learning praxis. It suggests that certain event becomes useful experience for future occurrences only if we establish adequate relation between that particular and preceding experience. It’s all about open mindedness. It is necessary to recognize that every new experience has the same validity

and importance as previous and that it has legitimate right to reconfigure our previous perspectives.

In order to achieve that, we sometimes use certain techniques during workshops – exercises aimed to provoke particular emotion – for example, participants are put in situation in which some of them are obviously being discriminated; it's necessary to watch their reactions carefully and to find the way for participants to reconsider and analyze these reactions. It can only be done if the workshop conductor is very good in keeping the entire process in place. It is also vital that participants have confidence in each other, so you can use that confidence and rely on it during process of transformation of experience into knowledge.

How we conceived and realized this with children, you will find in following sections which bring forward scenario of one of our workshops treating the issue of discrimination.

### What were our thoughts while creating workshop “DISCRIMINATION”

The basic idea was to familiarize children with the concept of the discrimination. So, we asked them what they thought about the meaning of that word. The further activities were focused on creation of one experience which can help them to understand this concept better. We think that personal experience is often of the greatest importance for qualitative learning, so we improved activities with “conductor and sweets”. That is “classic” example of discrimination. But we didn't want to cause too much frustration, so both groups of participants were “positively” and “negatively” discriminated (each of them got more of something, but also was deprived of something comparing to another). This made it possible for us to make the children see discrimination as unfair “rewarding and punishing” of persons only because she/he (doesn't) have the specific feature which is most often impossible to change. We would like to have a clear distinction between situations in which someone is being rewarded for his achievements (f. e. medal for sport players).

In our opinion, it is necessary to have in mind that children at this age can hardly be so decentralized to recognize their participation in certain act of discrimination, but they can see how unpleasant this phenomenon is for someone who is subdued to it. So they could think about the types of discrimination which can occur in their school and which they would like to inform the school public about. We wished to strengthen children's active relation to their environment through activity “Wall- newspaper”.

## **WORKSHOP SCENARIO – DISCRIMINATION –<sup>1</sup>**

### **Goals:**

- developing the concept of "discrimination"

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<sup>1</sup> This workshop scenario is property of Group “Let`s...” and can not be used without permission of the Group.

- positive action in direction of pointing to discrimination

### Material

- 2 large papers
- stickers
- sweets (candy bars) for all participants
- crepe tape

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. IF SOMEONE ASKED YOU...

5 min

Workshop leader prepares large piece of paper on which the word DISCRIMINATION is written and about 15 blank stickers attached to paper.

He tells participants *to imagine the situation in which someone asks them what the discrimination was, and to form their answer.* What is the meaning of that word, in their opinion...?

He writes down the children's answers on stickers. When he estimates that there are no more answers, he says that they will return to that word later, but before that he invites them to participate in further activities.

### 2. HOW THAT CAN LOOK LIKE

15 min

First, the workshop leader should divide the group of children in two parts, and the separation criterion should be something obvious, f. e. height (half of the line goes to one, and another half goes to another side) or some other criterion if conductor thinks it suits better to group he works with (gender, colour of eyes ...).

**»I have an idea. Some of you will get a task and others will get a little present. I decided to divide you like this – those who are tall should come to this part of the classroom and those who are less tall should go to another part. I decided to give sweets those who are »tall«, particularly because of their height. And those who are in the group of less tall will not get a sweet because of their height, but they can play one very interesting and exiting game. Those who are in the group of »tall« cannot play that game. Group of »tall«, please do not eat your sweets now, there will be time for that later. «**

One leader puts chairs for those who are »tall« so that they can watch another group while playing. He refuses to answer their questions about what is going on with explanation that they cannot play because they are tall. He writes down children's reactions, complains and his opinion on the situation (is it unpleasant for them, etc...)

Another conductor presents the game HIDDEN CONDUCTOR (the game is performed 3 times – two times the hidden conductor is someone from the group, but third time it is the workshop conductor). He explains the game quietly so that another group cannot hear what the game is about.

Instruction: **»Now we are going to play game which called »Hidden conductor«. That's one very interesting game. It plays like this: «Let's all form a circle. I need one volunteer (if no one wants, workshop conductor himself chooses a child). The child**

goes out of the classroom and the rest of the group pick a 'hidden conductor'. Conductor's task is to show some moves and others should repeat those. The volunteer comes back, enters the circle and watches the group doing the same moves, following the conductor; but everyone watches the conductor in secret, so that volunteer cannot guess who is 'hidden conductor'. The conductor can change moves, but he must do that in the way that volunteer cannot figure out who the conductor is actually he should change moves only when volunteer turns his back on him. If the volunteer guessed who the conductor was, then the conductor becomes the person who should guess and goes out of the classroom while others pick new conductor. Remember, try not to watch the conductor directly«

### 3. EXCHANGE AND CONCEPT

10 min

Everybody sits in the circle again. Leader asks participants

»What have actually happened? «

»How did you feel about it? «

»Do you think that that what have happened was right? Why? «

When participants finish their statements, workshop conductor should tell them that this activity actually was the example of discrimination and should ask them how they would explain the concept of the discrimination now. And then he invites them to take a look at the paper with their statements from the beginning of the workshop. He reads them what they said about the discrimination before and asks them if that corresponds to what they think about it now. Leader takes those stickers which do not correspond to discrimination and leaves only those which determine the concept:

»Discrimination is when we don't give someone same rights only because he has or doesn't have some characteristic. It is when we separate people/children on the basis of some feature and wrongfully reward or punish them because of that attribute.«

### 4. ATTENTION, ATTENTION!!!

15 min

Participants should be divided into small groups (every group has 4-5 members). They get common instruction – to imagine that they witnessed the act of discrimination in their school, where someone was wrongfully separated. They should agree within groups what would be imaginary situation.

When they are done, one large paper should be attached to the wall for every group. Then they get new instruction – They should imagine that the paper is a wall-newspaper which is placed in the school hall and they can write something about that event (which they imagined) so that other pupils and teachers pay attention to what is going on. If someone has an idea for solving the problem, she/he should write it down, as well. This is an imaginary situation so children shouldn't write down real names of their friends.

### 5. PRESENTATION OF WALL-NEWSPAPER

10 min

One group shows their wall-newspaper and the rest of children tell how they've understood what happened on the basis of what is shown. The authors of the paper can

make comments, if they have something to add. The same process repeats with other to groups.

**6. NOT TO BE DISCRIMINATION ON THE WORKSHOP** **10 min**

Those who got sweets now play game “The conductor”, and those who played now get sweets. Then in the end everybody plays the game together and eats sweets.