

Unseen Teachers and the Limits of Diversity

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In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates raises the question of whether the art of citizenship can be taught; he then takes the position that it cannot. To support his claim, Socrates observes that the Athenians themselves act as though virtue cannot be taught and, in fact, the very best Athenians do not pass virtue on to their sons, either by undertaking to teach it themselves or by hiring someone else to teach it to them.¹ Protagoras, though, having presented himself as one who will form his students into good citizens by making them better and better persons every day, seeks to refute Socrates' argument (318b and 319a). Towards the end of his reply to Socrates, Protagoras turns on him and says, "As it is, Socrates, you affect delicate sensibilities, because everyone here is a teacher of virtue, to the best of his ability, and you can't see a single one. You might as well look for a teacher of Greek; you wouldn't find a single one of those either" (327e–328a). This is a striking observation that Plato gives to Protagoras, namely that there are some things for which teachers are all around even when neither seen nor recognized. It is just this — something that everyone teaches but for which no teachers are seen — that, it will be argued, marks a decisive boundary of diversity, in fact a limit of tolerable diversity.

The necessary condition for diversity among human beings is identifiable difference on the basis of which individual persons can be distinguished as having this feature or not, either absolutely or to some degree. Given the multifarious ways in which human beings can differ, some characteristics or attributes mark more significant differences than others, depending on the context or the interest of the person noting the difference. For a physical anthropologist the difference in length of fingers could well be significant, but this is not so for a school making a claim that its students are diverse. Further, within a particular context the differences that are significant may have more or less weight in establishing diversity, again depending on the purpose for noting the difference.

Currently, student diversity is noted and attended to in many American schools; as a result, those preparing to teach in these schools are expected to be adept at working with diverse populations. Of the six professional standards used by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in granting unit accreditation, one is simply titled "Diversity." In this instance, the emphasis on diversity derives from the need to help "teacher candidates and other school personnel develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn." In the explication of this standard, several indicators of diversity are cited, including "males and females with diverse ethnic, racial, language, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds and histories and from different regions of the country and world" and students with exceptionalities.² The point of this standard is that those who would teach in American schools need to be proficient in working with students who are diverse in the ways indicated.

The indicators of diversity in the NCATE list, however, encompass so many differences, even different histories, that whenever two or more students assemble there would be diversity. But surely more than that is intended when there is an appeal to the value of diversity in the schools. One might ask, for example, is family history of illness or family ethnicity a more significant indicator of diversity in schools? Even though each type of diversity could strongly affect the task of learning, ethnicity probably counts more for indicating diversity than does family medical history. But why? In a school, what makes one type of diversity more significant than another?

In answering this question, the first task is to examine the ways in which diversity becomes significant in schools. This leads to the next and primary question for this inquiry: is there a limit to diversity in the schools or is diversity always an incremental value such that the more of it, the better? If there is a limit to diversity, then how is the limit recognized? Answering that brings us back to Protagoras's observation.

DIVERSITY THAT IS SIGNIFICANT FOR SCHOOLS

NCATE's interest in diversity derives from the need to help all students learn. This connects diversity to the essential purpose of the schools, namely the promotion of learning. The types of diversity that impact the fulfillment of that purpose are, one might say, internally significant for the schools. Diversity can impact learning in at least two different ways. First, students who are diverse may differ both in their interests and in the modes of instruction by which they best learn. Part of the intent of the NCATE standard on diversity is that candidates for teaching should be prepared for "different teaching and learning styles shaped by cultural influences."³ This could be described as an interest in pedagogy for diversity. The argument is that since different types of students learn in different ways, those who would teach them have to be able to teach in ways appropriate to these differences. Identifying types of difference that affect learning may well be difficult to do, but once discovered these differences mark diversity significant for the schools.

Diversity also relates to the environment for learning. The pedagogical task might be simplified if there were little diversity in a classroom. But if all students were from more or less the same background, such homogeneity could negatively affect the learning of these students. They would not benefit from exposure to different perspectives offered by students of different backgrounds, nor would they be experientially prepared for living in a society that is less culturally monolithic than their classroom. The absence of some kinds of diversity, then, causes a deficit in the environment for learning. In contrast to pedagogy for diversity, the interest here is in the pedagogical value of diversity.

The diversity significant for schools is that which is connected with learning: students who need particular *diverse modes of teaching* in order to learn well or *students with diverse backgrounds* whose presence would enrich the learning environment. Accordingly, a hierarchy of diversity could be established based on the effects of various kinds of difference for pedagogy. The more a type of diversity

complicates the task of teaching the more it must be noted by a school; likewise the more that a type of diversity enhances the learning environment the more valuable it is for a school. On these two bases, some types of diversity count more than others for schools and, in effect, become more recognizable. The relative number of German-Americans and Italian-Americans in a class of students or the mix of Protestants and Catholics would not now count much for diversity, although once it would have. On the other hand, the presence of Mexican-Americans or Muslims might give a school a better claim for diversity, because these identities may be thought to greatly impact pedagogy by making teaching complicated or by enriching the environment of learning.

This suggests that what counts for diversity is a moving target since, over time, identified differences have varying impacts on pedagogy. Depending on when the snapshot is taken, particular differences are more or less sharp in distinguishing one group from another. Just as what it meant to be Protestant or Catholic was once more decisive than it is now, so too what it will mean to be African-American and European-American may well be less important in the future than it is now. The consequences of these identities for pedagogy will vary accordingly. Thus, cultural and social influences determine, to some extent anyway, what type of diversity is at any moment consequential for pedagogy.

This becomes especially evident when racial or ethnic identity strongly correlates with educational achievement. Some differences among human beings such as talent and character traits would seem to be always and intrinsically educationally relevant in that they are reasonably expected to correlate with the educational attainments of students. But when a difference that is not apparently educationally relevant is strongly correlated with educational outcomes, then that difference becomes significant in schools. Hence, if African-American students who attend schools that are not racially diverse do less well than white students who also attend schools not marked by racial diversity, then racial identity — even though it has no intrinsic relationship to educational performance — becomes of interest. Under this circumstance, race is recognized as a significant marker of diversity and attaining racial diversity in schools may become a policy goal. If, on the other hand, there were no significant difference in the educational performance of groups in racially segregated schools, racial identity would have less importance as a marker of diversity for the schools.

This last point may be hard to accept. Racial identity seems to be an intractable source of identity in the United States so that it is hard to imagine it being overlooked by schools. But this may be because race correlates with the distribution of social goods other than schooling. This leads to another way in which diversity becomes significant in the schools, one that derives from the distribution of social goods rather than from a relation to pedagogy and hence is external to the essential purpose of the schools. In fulfilling their essential purpose of promoting learning, schools distribute various goods. Some persons receive more schooling than others, some receive better schooling than others, and some learn more and different things than

others. These forms of distribution in the schools can be correlated, either in fact or by belief, with distributions outside the schools.⁴ When diversity becomes a concern in social distributions associated with educational attainments, then derivatively diversity becomes a concern within the schools, not because it may be pedagogically important but because it is socially important. If, for example, income, occupational opportunity, status, prestige, and power are distributed on the basis of educational attainments, then issues of diversity in the distribution of these social goods become issues of diversity in the distribution of educational goods. Should the distribution of one of these social goods be strongly correlated with gender or racial identity, then these identities also become important in schools so that schools are examined in terms of their gender and racial diversity.

The significance of diversity in the school thus derives from two different sources, one internal and the other external and, depending on the source, two different types of issues appear. The pedagogical interest in diversity seems natural to the schools because it is related to the tasks of teaching and learning. If schools have diverse student bodies, then teachers should be prepared to teach in light of that diversity. If a diverse student body enhances the learning of all students, then providing for such diversity is pedagogically important. In each case, the issues surrounding diversity are primarily pedagogical. But when the interest in diversity comes to the schools by way of the distribution of social goods, the issues that arise pertain more to social justice than to pedagogy. The significance of diversity for the schools is, then, less straightforward both because the connection between distribution of educational benefits and the distribution of social goods has to be demonstrated and because the interest in good pedagogy is not the same as the interest in social justice.

The different bases for interest in diversity in schools seem to be reflected in the divergent decisions of the United States Supreme Court in *Grutter* and *Gratz*. In considering the admissions policies of the University of Michigan Law School, the Court held that “[t]he Law School’s narrowly tailored use of race in admissions decisions to further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body is not prohibited by the Equal Protection Clause.”⁵ Here the interest in diversity was sustained because of its contribution to good pedagogy. On the other hand, the Court rejected the admissions policy of the University of Michigan’s College of Literature, Science, and the Arts precisely because it was “not narrowly tailored to achieve educational diversity.”⁶ The identification of race as used by the College was in effect decisive in granting admission and thus was simply a device to increase the number of underrepresented minorities who were enrolled. However noble and well intended that goal, the Court rejected the College’s admissions policy, presumably because the interest in diversity looked beyond pedagogy to a social interest outside the school.

THE LIMITS OF DIVERSITY

The types of diversity described so far could be described as being positive in that the interest in making schools diverse in these ways aims at achieving some good, either good instruction or a valued distribution of social goods. The forms of

diversity instrumental to attaining these purposes may generate strife and struggle, but the variously identified groups who make claims based on their identities share some common understandings which permit them to embrace the enterprise of the schools. The differences involved do not create boundaries so decisive that they inhibit the attainment of the good in question. Protagoras's question to Socrates, though, identifies a type of diversity that could be described as negative because it is based on a difference so decisive that interaction over this boundary is not really possible within the schools or society. The locus for this kind of diversity is revealed when there is something that everyone teaches but for which no teachers are recognized.

In response to Socrates' claim that virtue cannot be taught, Protagoras asks and is permitted to make the contrary case by telling a story (320c8–328d2). Protagoras begins by relating how at their genesis mortal creatures were equipped with the powers needed for survival. Humans, in their turn, were initially given the gifts of technical skills and working with fire. With these, humans at first lived in scattered units, but this left them vulnerable to attacks from beasts. To save themselves, they gathered together and founded cities. Protagoras describes the result: "The outcome when they did so was that they wronged each other because they did not possess the art of politics, and so they would scatter and again be destroyed" (322b). Out of fear that humans would completely self-destruct, Zeus came to the rescue, and provided "justice and a sense of shame to humans, so that there would be order within cities and bonds of friendship to unite them" (322c). These gifts of justice and shame, unlike technical skills, were given to all humans for the reason that "cities would never come to be if only a few possessed these, as is the case with the other arts" (322d). Justice and shame, then, are posited as qualities necessary for citizenship in the city. Lest there be any doubt about this, Zeus is given to say, "Death to him who cannot partake of shame and justice, for he is a pestilence to the city" (322d).

The story that Protagoras tells is about the components of civic virtue, those qualities that must be possessed by anyone who seeks to participate in the life of the city. In fact justice, along with the rest of civic virtue, is so fundamental that, Protagoras notes, even those who are unjust should nonetheless pretend to justice "since one must have some trace of it or not be human" (323c). Having established this point, Protagoras ends his story and, after a brief discussion of the purpose of punishment, argues that when it comes to that "which all citizens must have for there to be a city" (324e) everyone in the city strives to develop this quality in the young. Protagoras describes how a child's nurse, mother, tutor, and father work to inculcate the virtues of a human being. This work is continued by teachers, even music teachers and athletic trainers who, aside from teaching skills, are concerned with the moral development of their charges. Following this, the development of virtue continues in public life by the force of law.

The point that Protagoras makes in this passage is that those qualities essential for participation in civic life are so important that everyone seeks to develop them in those being prepared to live in the city. Justice is such a quality; everyone who lives in the city is presumed to possess it. If a person is found to be without justice

and is incorrigible, the only recourse is to remove that individual from the city either through exile or death (325b).

This is the context for Protagoras's scolding of Socrates that he was affecting "delicate sensibilities" (327e), or as another translator puts it "acting like a spoiled child,"⁷ in asking where teachers of virtue could be found. Since everyone teaches the virtue necessary for citizenship, no one is recognized as *the* teacher of virtue. Looking for such teachers would be, according to Protagoras, like asking who teaches the native language to a child. Since everyone the child encounters does that, no one can be recognized as having the specific role of native language teacher. Of course, Socrates could have been made to reply, "We are all teachers of Greek to the young." But that is just the other side of the same coin; those things for which no one is recognized as a teacher are the same as those for which everyone is a teacher.

This phenomenon, that there are some things that everyone teaches but for which no teachers are recognized, points to differences that serve as limits to diversity both in the city and the schools. Diversity is no longer valuable in the schools if it occurs over a quality that must be presumed if the work of the school is to proceed. In this case, the diversity in question is still significant for schools, but its significance is that everyone must be on one side of the boundary over which diversity is defined. The difference used to distinguish "us" from "others" is such that there is no place for the "others." This is a limit of diversity. It can be identified by discovering that which everyone teaches but for which no one is seen as a teacher.

Of course, some limits of diversity are obvious and no special strategy is needed to identify them. For example, civic life depends on being able to trust that people around us are not suicide bombers. Diversity over this characteristic is not tolerated because the very possibility of civic life is at stake. This example, though, shows the point of Protagoras's question. What would be the sense of asking, Who are those that teach the young not to be suicide bombers?

The shared understandings needed for civic life involve much more than safety of life and limb; they extend, in the description used by Protagoras, to the behaviors needed to achieve "order within cities and bonds of friendship" (322c). For example, Charles Taylor, in discussing the politics of difference, identifies basic beliefs of what he calls "difference-blind" liberalism. One of these is that there is a public realm that is different from the private realm; close to this is the belief that politics is different from religion.⁸ The effect of these beliefs is to create a pluralistic, perhaps even secular, space within which it is possible to act without important aspects of one's identity, such as religious affiliation, marital status, or sexual orientation, taking on primary importance. The importance these aspects of one's identity might have in the private realm is not replicated in the public realm. To the extent that this public, pluralistic space exists and is constitutive of civic life in contemporary Western culture, the beliefs supporting it qualify as that for which there are no teachers. The young who are being prepared to work and function in a public, pluralistic space learn to do this in many ways, on many occasions, and from the many people with whom they interact, but no one is seen to be a teacher of how to

distinguish the private from the public self and how to live with pluralism. This coincidence of everyone's teaching how to live in a public, pluralistic space but no one's being recognized as such a teacher points to a limit of diversity both in society and in the schools. The presumption is that on this matter there is no diversity: a student's life in the schools is public, and therefore different from the student's private life, and in public the student must be able to negotiate pluralism of belief in what is good.

While public, pluralistic space does not in itself entail that differences such as religious affiliation, ethnicity, and sexual orientation be ignored, either in schools or in society, it does require that such differences be rendered to some degree inconsequential, that they do not trump everything else. Differences that are fundamentally important in private can be noted in public, but when noted they are not to interfere with common life together. Within a family it may well be expected that only those who share the family's religion, ethnicity, or race are eligible as marriage partners, but that does not carry over to public life where one can work and play with such outsiders. What might be a boundary that cannot be transgressed in private must be permeable in public.

People who are incapable of marking the difference between the public and private realms are fundamentally incapable of participating in the life of modern Western societies. Likewise, it would be impossible for such persons to attend the schools sponsored by these societies. Their presence would not be a source of pedagogic enrichment but rather would be completely disruptive since they could not hold the beliefs constitutive of the pluralistic space in these schools. This is not to say that those who cannot function in public, pluralistic space are wrong in their beliefs, but rather that such inability puts them outside the boundary of civic life as that is understood in Western culture.

Even when the focus is not exactly on diversity, locating something which everyone teaches and for which teachers are not recognized points to basic qualities of citizenship in a culture. For example, in how many ways are those who grow up in the United States taught that adulthood involves gainful employment? The common expectation is that everyone works, at least for part of his or her life. In fact, to expect the opposite, that some persons in the United States will not or should not be employed, such as women or the handicapped or those born into poverty, is denigrating and condemns the objects of that expectation to what may be aptly termed second class citizenship. And yet, except for persons who are highly likely to become unemployable, teachers specifically of employment are not seen. Looking for them would be, to use Protagoras's image, as feckless as Socrates' looking for teachers of Greek. Diversity based on those preparing for gainful employment and those who are not, though probably not disruptive to a school's environment, is not sought by the schools. This, too, then could be termed a limit of diversity, not because it concerns something that is dangerous or would destroy civic life, but rather because it deals with a universal expectation of what adults do.

The limits of diversity in the schools also indicate the types of diversity that are tolerable. The NCATE standard referred to above lists various types of diversity:

gender, ethnic, racial, language, religious, socioeconomic, and cultural. Each one of these diversities could mark a difference that would make it impossible to share life together; each one, in other words, could be a limit of diversity. The fact that these differences are tolerated in schools means that whatever decisiveness they could have as boundaries is sufficiently blurred so that these differences can be recognized without risk to “order within cities and bonds of friendship.” But under, say, conditions of ethnic nationalism, ethnicity signals friend or foe and cannot be rendered anything less than decisive in the construction of civic life. Under that circumstance, ethnic diversity is not tolerable, neither in the schools nor elsewhere. Similarly, men and women are commonly permitted to attend school together in Western societies. More than that, the schools are expected to provide equal opportunities for men and women because of an underlying belief that men and women are equally free to determine their destinies. These beliefs make gender diversity in the schools acceptable, even desired. This form of diversity, however, would be intolerable if gender were a matter of overwhelming importance and a cause for differential treatment in most aspects of life. In sum, the boundaries that mark the limits of diversity also distinguish the differences that are tolerable and benign from those that are destructive to public life.

Diversity is valued in the schools, but not all forms of diversity. There are limits to diversity deriving from the virtues that are necessary for those who are citizens in the society that sponsors the schools. Some limits will be obvious. Others may be more subtle, but there is a way to identify these: look for that about which it could be said, “everyone here is a teacher....and you can’t see a single one” (327c).

1. Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. Stanley Lombard and Karen Bell (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 319a–20b. This work will be cited in the text for all subsequent references.

2. National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, “Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Schools, Colleges, and Departments of Education” (2006), 10 and 32.

3. *Ibid.*, 29.

4. Compare with the discussion of the distribution of noneducational social goods as related to the distribution of educational goods in Thomas F. Green, with the assistance of David P. Ericson and Robert H. Seidman, *Predicting the Behavior of the Educational System* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1980), 41–8.

5. *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 307 (2003).

6. *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 245 (2003).

7. Plato *Protagoras*, trans. C.C.W. Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

8. Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 62.