

Struggling over Differences in Schools

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I applaud Robert Roemer for addressing such important and challenging topics. But certain aspects of his analysis seem problematic to me. I discuss these aspects here in hope that my comments might be of some use as Roemer develops his ideas further.

First is Roemer's characterization of public and private spheres. This characterization strikes me as being far too static, as if particular aspects of human experience have been relegated once and for all to either the public or private domain. Feminists, among others, have long criticized such a notion and have argued successfully for making harms once thought to be private matters public including child abuse, domestic violence, and marital rape.

Roemer's discussion brought to mind the recent case in which Muslim school-girls in France were not allowed to attend classes unless they removed their headscarves. (In addition to *Hijab*, religious symbols of Christianity, such as the crucifix, were also as a means of keeping religion out of public spaces.) This places Muslim girls in quite a bind, since their religion calls on women to cover their hair in public. It would seem that, on Roemer's account, these girls either have to shave their heads (as some did) or flout their religion's teaching or be rendered "fundamentally incapable of participating in the life of modern Western societies." Setting aside the question of how this particular case should be resolved, it does illustrate how contested — not only theoretically but also practically — the "boundary" between the public and private can become. Recent cases involving gay and lesbian students who want to attend school dances with same sex dates are also illustrative, making their (private?) sexual orientation a matter for public debate.

Second is Roemer's characterization of the role of the school in relation to differences. In his account, schools accommodate (or fail to accommodate) the particular differences that students happen to bring with them. Lacking in this account is a consideration of the ways in which schools help to *produce* differences. Take for example, "ability," one of the differences with which schools are most preoccupied. First, the educational apparatus (of which schools are a part) defines what will count as ability; this is a social construct, not a naturally occurring attribute such as brown eyes. Today, for the purposes of schooling, ability is conceived almost exclusively in terms of a fairly narrow range of intellectual attributes. Schools then test students to assess how much ability they "possess." Students deemed to have significantly less ability than normal are classified as "disabled," while their peers who are deemed to have significantly more are labeled "gifted." Depending on where students fall along this ability continuum, they are sorted into relatively homogeneous classrooms or groups within classrooms. In these different classrooms and groups, students have quite different educational experiences. Lessons are typically simple for some and complex for others, focused on "the basics" in

some and on “enrichment” in others, and encouraging “mastery” in some and “critical thinking” in others. Such differences could be multiplied. The point is that schools do not simply measure a naturally occurring attribute called “ability” and then treat students in ways that in some sense match that attribute; rather, they participate in producing people who are relatively less or more able.

Beyond that, schools participate in the production and legitimization of grossly unequal social and economic outcomes for students. When a seemingly value neutral and scientifically determined numerical score is linked to students’ purported abilities, it seems only natural and quite unremarkable when certain students end up with watered-down educational experiences and low-paying or no jobs while others enjoy rich educational experiences and the goods associated with such experiences.

Third, and related, is Roemer’s analysis of the value particular differences have for schools. At one point, Roemer argues that,

[Protagoras] 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.

At some points in his analysis, that “something” is left unspecified, but at other points, the “something” is said to be “civic virtue.” On his account, “justice” is associated most explicitly with civic virtue. It is not at all apparent that everyone does indeed teach “justice,” but assuming for the sake of argument that everyone does, we encounter another difficulty: What conception of justice informs this teaching that Roemer claims all provide?

Further, it is important to recognize that to whatever extent today’s teachers and other school personnel may view “differences” as enriching and may want schools to promote social justice, many of the kinds of characteristics now referred to as differences would have led to their possessors’ marginalization or outright exclusion not very long ago. African American parents and their allies and parents of children with intellectual and physical disabilities and their allies struggled mightily so that their children could attend public schools alongside their same-age white and nondisabled peers. Today teenage gay and lesbian students and members of some religious groups (sometimes with the help of their parents and allies) are fighting for fair and equal treatment in public schools. Indeed, historically, large numbers of teachers and school officials have *resisted* many manifestations of diversity, and if my experience is any indication, such resistance continues in a fair number of schools today. It is hard to imagine that a concern over “civic virtue” is more significantly implicated in such resistance than is racism, able-ism, and homophobia.

Roemer concludes by restating his recurrent theme: that the key to determining which forms of diversity will not be valued is to “look for that about which it could be said, ‘everyone here is a teacher...and you can’t see a single one.’” Expressed somewhat differently, Roemer’s point seems to be that when there is nearly universal agreement that certain characteristics are undesirable, these characteristics

will not be valued in school. Isn't that true by definition? Questions about differences and diversity arise in relation to characteristics (and ideas) over which there is some disagreement or conflict, not over those upon which there is near or actual consensus.

With a few possible exceptions — suicide bombers, to use Roemer's example — it is unlikely that any formula, or "strategy" as he calls it, can be used to determine in the abstract which varieties of differences will or will not be valued or tolerated in schools in general. The decentralized nature of schools in the United States means that cultural and other differences between the states, and even between districts within the states, will bear on this question. Most of the districts in my state, Kansas, positively value, and others at least tolerate, linguistic differences, but none, as far as I know, fully value the expression of a sexual orientation other than heterosexual. (That, however, is changing as more and more students make a public issue of their sexual identity.)

Early in his essay, Roemer points out that what counts as a difference that *makes* a difference depends on context. This is a terrific observation. His analysis would be stronger, I think, if the context with which he is most interested, schooling, was attended to more closely. Doing so would no doubt help to illuminate which differences are important to which teachers and other school personnel, students, parents, and others, and on what grounds these differences matter.