

Recognizing Students' Diverse Identities in Schools

Abstract

This paper examines the concept of 'recognition' as an important social mechanism in educational institutions. It focuses on the idea that human beings need recognition and that recognition should be nurtured at the public level. Recognizing people of different race, gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity must be practiced in all places, including schools. In the public place of school, students need to be recognized for their personal identity and distinctness from everyone else so that they will not be glossed over by the identity of the majority group. Recognition forms identity and affects learning. Therefore, misrecognition may lead to anxiety and feeling of unworthiness, which as a result can be a block to students' learning.

In this paper, I will explain the term 'identity' through the lens of *recognition* and *socio-cultural positions*. I will use Taylor's theory on identity as 'dialogical' and recognition of self at the private and public levels, as well as Bingham's theory of recognition and 'mirroring' in the public sphere of school. I will then discuss Apple's and Beyer's ideas on the role of social and political power in education in terms of who is recognized and whose dignity is sustained in schools. Finally, I will present some examples from the book "White Teacher" by Paley to emphasize the importance of recognizing students with different identities and beliefs in classrooms. The ultimate goal is to understand that recognition is a matter of human dignity, and the dignity of students of various identity positions needs to be fostered in educational settings.

Introduction

When we think about school, we usually think about subject matters, course contents, exams, school rules, grades, and other issues that are more related to non-human than human acknowledgment. As educators, one of our concerns must be how to make students feel acknowledged, recognized, and valued in addition to getting them all to think, learn, and be successful in school and in society. Since the concepts of human recognition and learning are interrelated, we need to promote a school system that values and respects all students regardless of their gender, race, class, or ethnicity.

In school—as a public space—students need to be recognized for their personal identity and distinctness from everyone else. Classrooms can represent a microcosm of society and any recognition/misrecognition there can be reproduced in society. We also need to keep in mind that classrooms are a reflection of what goes on in the society since students bring their already shaped identities and values into the classrooms. While recognition of various groups in a positive way can reproduce dignity, recognition that is based on inequalities can bring about reproduction of inequalities. Therefore, we need education that positively recognizes students with different cultural backgrounds, races,

and identities, and fosters the dignity of all students. Recognition is a matter of human dignity and school is where recognition needs to be attended to.

In this paper, I will examine the concepts of recognition and mirroring in the public place of school. I will define the term 'identity' and explain the importance of recognizing students' diverse identities in classrooms. I will develop my discussion with the role of politics and power in education in terms of who is recognized and whose dignity is sustained in schools. Finally I will present some examples from the book "White Teacher" by Paley (1979) to emphasize the importance of treating students equally while recognizing them for their unique individuality.

Identity: Definition

Identity is generally linked to and defined through answering the question "Who am I?". I can define myself through the relations I have with others, or through my function and what I do. This way, I am answering the question who I am by situating myself in some kind of social, professional, and/or familial space. I can also define myself by relating to *ethical space*, as Taylor (1991) calls it. Our tastes, desires, values, issues of importance, standards, opinions, and aspirations all make sense through "where we are coming from" and where we situate ourselves in ethical space. The important point is that the terms that define this space, and situate people within it, differ remarkably. Based on what these terms are, people constitute their identities as self-descriptions that help them make what they are. This is the definition of identity that is important to Taylor.

Furthermore, according to Taylor (1994), the issues of where we are coming from and where we situate ourselves in terms of values and standards are understood *dialogically*. That means, we define our identity not independently, but through the dialogues we have with, or sometimes in struggle against, our parents and elders whom Taylor (citing Mead, 1934) calls 'significant others'. Our first definitions of ourselves are given by them and it is important to us how they want to see us. Therefore, we are initially shaped by our surroundings.

Another description of identity is given by Holland and her colleagues (1998). While Taylor's definition invokes more philosophical streams, Holland et al. define identity from an interdisciplinary field that brings together social psychology, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. They see identity as social products as well as psychohistorical formations. Holland et al. emphasize the subject 'positions' that have been defined by the worlds of socially produced, culturally constructed activities.

In general, Holland et al. define identity as self-understanding. They assert that "people tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (p.3). These self-understandings are what they refer to as identities. To Holland et al., people's identities are changeable and malleable, and so subject to discursive power. At the same time, they believe in people's generativity and the new ways of being they can create. Although people are social and

cultural products and as such restricted, they are still able to produce possibilities to liberate themselves. They certainly believe in people's ability to reshape their sense of self and make their own ways into the cultural worlds while they are positioned in the hierarchies of power and privilege.

Taylor's and Holland et al.'s ideas on identity and self construction are interrelated. Taylor says that identity is constituted dialogically through discourses that one has with significant others, in which he/she is entitled or denied recognition. Hence, those aspects of our identities that we share with others need to be recognized publicly. Taylor emphasizes that people of different cultural groups need to be recognized equally. People need cultural recognition, and the cultural recognition of the minority groups should not be glossed over by the predominant culture. This shows that social and political power can play an important role in who is recognized and whose culture is acknowledged.

Holland et al. make similar points. They state that we are in a world where cultures, activities, and values have been defined for us. Some cultural practices have been recognized while others have been misrecognized. Social and political power, rank, and status can impose some 'positions' onto some minority groups and misrecognize them. These misrecognitions affect people's self-understandings and identities since recognition forms identity. People need recognition in all places, including schools. Recognizing people of different race, gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity must be practiced and nurtured.

In the following sections, I will focus more on the concept of recognition and discuss the importance of recognizing students for who they are. Students want and need to feel they are worthy in their teacher's eyes, and they want it to be real. They do not deserve to be looked down or to feel unworthy because of their race, class, gender, or any subject positions they have been assigned as the result of social or racial injustices. They want their teacher to see something in them that is worth honoring and respecting, and this is a kind of recognition that counts to them.

Theory of Recognition: Taylor

Taylor (1994) discusses the importance of recognizing the distinctiveness and worth of different social groups and cultural communities and emphasizes the need for recognition at both private and public levels. Since identity is constituted dialogically, we look at others to find out who we are; thus, those aspects of our identities that we share with other people need to be recognized publicly. Taylor believes, "Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need" (p. 26).

In Taylor's words, public recognition is about two things: 1) the acknowledgement of individuals' basic rights as human beings, regardless of their gender, race, class, or ethnicity; and 2) the acknowledgement of their practices and needs as members of specific cultural groups. This results in two types of recognition that Taylor finds in today's political scene: 'the politics of universalism' or 'the politics of

equal dignity', with the focus on equal dignity of all citizens and the equalization of rights and entitlements; and 'the politics of difference', with the focus on unique identity of individuals or group of people.

Taylor (1994) explains that modern societies need a liberalism that recognizes the “dignity” of each individual in the public domain. The modern notion of “dignity” is acquired when social inequalities are collapsed and the premodern notion of “honor”—the result of social hierarchies— is ended. With the move from honor to dignity have come the demands for equal dignity and recognition of all individuals. Such recognition is possible through recognizing the cultural community that each individual belongs to and their distinctiveness as well.

As a result, failures of recognition can occur at two levels: 1) failures to recognize that the members of a minority or unprivileged group have distinctive practices, traditions, and cultural identity; and 2) failures to recognize that the cultural identity of such groups is of deep importance and value (Taylor, 1994). These failures of recognition lead, at least, to feeling of emptiness by the members of the unrecognized cultures, feeling of not having a community and a basis for self-esteem, and, at the worst, embracing the risk of cultural annihilation. Taylor proposes remedies for such harms including “publicizing, admiring, and explicitly preserving the cultural traditions and achievements of these groups, understood as traditions and achievements specifically belonging to the descendants of the relevant cultures” (p.76).

In relation to the school curriculum, Taylor (1994) explains that students need cultural recognition in school since school is a place where identity is at stake, and in his words, recognition forms identity. Taylor’s idea on multicultural curricula is to respect all cultures equally and to represent all students, without giving some students of minority inferior images. He explains the reason as follows:

“... dominant groups tend to entrench their hegemony by inculcating an image of inferiority in the subjugated. The struggle for freedom and equality must therefore pass through a revision of these images. Multicultural curricula are meant to help in this process of revision” (p.66).

To Taylor, if a certain gender or race is excluded from the mainstream curriculum, it does not necessarily imply that students may be missing something important, but that the excluded group is given a demeaning image of themselves. Therefore, it is essential to have multicultural curricula that respect all cultures equally, while at the same time no group is downgraded.

Recognition and Mirroring: Bingham

Bingham (2001) discusses the role of recognition in education in his book “*Schools of Recognition: Identity Politics and Classroom Practices*”. By recognition, he means “the act of acknowledging others, and coming to be acknowledged by others” (p.3). Bingham argues that it is important that curriculum represents all students equally, recognize their diverse identities, cultures, and values, and respect human differences. To

acknowledge students' differences in curricula and school activities, it is important to understand the concept of "mirroring". In schools, students need someone to mirror back to them who they are. The term 'mirroring' in relation to recognition at school means that "when I enter the public sphere, I need someone, or some thing, that will mirror back to me an affirming sense of who I am" (p.34). Therefore, I need an other to mirror back to me who I am, and this mirror recognition must be *positive*. Teachers too are transformed through positive mirroring as they also need someone, a student, to mirror back and define who they are.

Following Taylor's account of recognition, Bingham (2001) explains that school as a public sphere is an important place to get mirror recognition because of its nature. Being critical of Taylor's idea about mirroring, Bingham emphasizes the role of mirroring as both 'reflective' and 'constitutive'. The shortcoming of a theory like Taylor's is that "it always starts with the private individual as pre-given, as if the individual completely precedes the mirror experience. This can hardly be the case, since mirrors create as well represent" (p.35). To Bingham, one can 'become' through the mirror experience; therefore, the mirror metaphor should not just be taken as to see who we already are but they also give us information about ourselves, and a sense of self that is new. Therefore, "Mirrors not only "reflect" us, they constitute us" (p.34).

Keeping this perspective on mirroring in mind, Bingham discusses two types of mirroring within the classroom walls: 1) curricular mirroring: "the sorts of reflections the self finds by way of the textual encounter", and 2) interpersonal mirroring: "the fleshy encounter. I can "see" myself on the written page, or I can "see" myself in another's eyes." (p.35).

What needs to be considered in textual mirroring are the diverse representations across the curriculum. Bingham discusses the textual mirroring and representation in the curriculum by asking 'Who' questions: "Who is represented in the curriculum?", "Who is getting recognition through the books that are being read in classrooms?", "Whose stories are being told? Who is being represented and who is being left out?" (p.36). It is crucial to know whose dignity is sustained through these representations both in schools and in the larger public domains.

Taylor sees recognition as the *main* reason for a culturally representative curriculum, but Bingham emphasizes that not all curricular change is based on the need for recognition. Citing Banks (1994), he adds the following reasons for including diverse cultures in curricula:

"... to empower students of color politically; to reduce racial prejudices; to create a more equitable school environment; to increase academic achievement of students from different ethnic, cultural, and gender groups; and to enable students to look from different perspectives with increasing facility" (p.37).

While textual mirroring is important because of the existence of the modern self in relation to what others say and write, interpersonal mirroring is also crucial. Such mirroring in schools can be given through teachers and other students. Others can give a

student an image of who he/she is and what it means to be him/her. Citing Hegel, Bingham (2001) sees this recognition as ‘conscious’ discovery of who one is; recognition as rethinking who one is in the presence of an other. However, there is another side to recognition—the psychological tones of private and public recognition. In Bingham’s words, one’s understanding of self in past and present, who one was and who one will be, might be different. A teacher or other students may offer a student an image different from the mirror image that he/she has experienced at home. That means the mirror recognition by significant others can be different from the mirror recognition one gets in the larger society. Therefore, one’s conscious thinking of who he/she is, may change by moving from the private to the public sphere.

To Bingham, misrecognition is when the image one is given at school differs from the image one has experienced at home. He argues that such misrecognition must be used as a cause for social action. Misrecognition is not a personal issue but has a larger social meaning. He reasons that “if one person encounters misrecognition because of his or her cultural, ethnic, race, gender, sexual, or class affiliation, it is likely that there are discourses at work in the culture at large whereby others may similarly encounter misrecognition” (p.47). Therefore, an insult to one’s dignity can show social injustice and the need for social change.

Social and Political Power: Apple & Beyer

Textual and interpersonal mirroring across the curriculum and in school reminds us of the important influence of politics and power relations in education. No education exists in isolation from politics, as Apple (1999) says. The ideological norms and values that everyone should get in schools, what is taught, how it is taught, and above all, how it is evaluated, are relatively limited to the cultural resources of dominant groups. An inclusive curriculum, which positively mirrors students’ cultures and values, goes beyond the dominant culture, allows different voices and views to be heard, and enables students to recognize the injustices that let only certain people succeed (Beyer & Apple, 1998). Thus, it is crucial to take into account the role of political power in what is textually mirrored in curriculum and whose culture is acknowledged.

In addition, students need to be aware of the *positions* they have been imposed throughout their life. Such positions are related to their gender, class, or race and are constructed socially and culturally through powerful discourses (Holland et al., 1998). These subject positions and misrecognitions affect students’ identities and their learning. For instance, an African-American student who has always been assigned the position of “less smart” in the society, including schools, is likely to envision fewer options for the future and be less prepared to enter the job market. Educational diagnostics that label some children “at risk,” for example, are the result of powerful discourses that affect their self-formation by positioning them to such discourses. In school, students need to be able to identify their subject positions and recognize that they have been misrecognized, so that they can claim a position other than the one they have always been subjected to.

Apple (1999, with Beyer) asserts that labeling learners in schools is the result of particular social and economic divisions in society. That is why we create “remedial curricula” for “slow” learners, for example, and then find that it is often related to the history of racial oppression and poverty. The problem is that the chances that a learner with a label such as ‘slow’ does a good job are small since the label of “slow” sticks. Beyer & Apple (1998) argue that if we are determined to have an inclusive education that engages all students in a meaningful and challenging way, one requirement is to recognize the real, complex identities of students. If we see that many African-American youth do not find schooling engaging, challenging, or rewarding, we need to provide a curriculum for them that understands their culture and where they come from. They state that teachers can influence their students’ hopes, dreams, attitudes, perspectives, and in general, their futures, and because of that they can affect the future of society they live in.

Celebrating and Respecting Differences: Paley

In the book “*White Teacher*”, Vivian Paley (1979) describes the important role of teachers in recognizing students for who they are. Reflecting on her own memories as a child, Paley explains that it was not easy for her to be Jewish in a mostly gentile classroom:

“... having a dozen other Jewish children in the class didn’t make being a Jew more acceptable in that room, because not one of the teachers accepted us as Jewish children... The more my parents provided me with roots in my own culture, the more I felt my differences from the culture of the school”. (p.11)

She continues that she did not know what she was at school as she was failed to be recognized as a Jew while knowing she was not a gentile. Throughout the book, as a white kindergarten teacher in an integrated school today, Paley shares her personal experiences and describes her progress in becoming a better teacher and learning how to deal with social and racial issues in school.

Presenting several examples, Paley illustrates the ways she chooses to equally recognize her students for their unique individuality. She offers suggestions on how to positively recognize and celebrate students’ differences. She recognizes students by acknowledging their cultural traditions, dresses, songs, religion, language, and the like. For example, she has parents write out their religion or culture songs and send their music or a record to teach to the class. She has the students share words from their native languages with the class while she also writes the same word in Hebrew—her own language—to show the reciprocity in recognition. As well, she has parents come to the classroom and bake food from their culture to share with other students. As an authority figure, Paley provides an environment where every child feels welcome and comfortable in her classroom and is not afraid to express his/her differences and learn about them.

On the first day of school, Paley expresses her feeling about meeting her new students:

“Here are thirty strangers who will become your intimate family. While you are watching them, they will be cautiously watching you. Nothing can be covered up. They instinctively know what you mean, whether or not you say it.” (p.28)

She then continues explaining how important it is to ‘know’ the students, accept and recognize all of them while teaching the students to recognize one another. As a teacher, she knows that her students look for recognition—a kind of recognition that counts. Students want their teacher to see something in them that is worth honoring and respecting; they *need* such recognition. Paley explains how difficult it is to do that and treat every child equally. She also mentions how crucial it is to be honest with her feelings regarding every one of the children:

“Each child wants to know immediately if he is a worthy person in your eyes. You cannot pretend, because the child knows all the things about himself that worry him. If you act as if you like him, but ignore the things he is anxious about, it doesn’t count. The child is glad you are nice to him, but down deep he figures if you really knew what he was like, you’d hate him. So your liking him without knowing him just makes him feel guilty”. (p.28).

Paley shows that she is against the norms which propose that teachers should be color-blind. For instance, in a meeting she had with a black parent, Mrs. Hawkins, she quotes Mrs. Hawkins’s comment on her children’s previous teacher who had said:

“There is no color difference in my classroom. All my children look alike to me.” “What rot,” said Mrs. Hawkins. “My children are black. They don’t look like your children. They know they’re black, and we want it recognized. It’s a positive difference, an interesting difference, and a comfortable natural difference. At least it could be so, if you teachers learned to value differences more. What you value, you talk about.” (p. 12)

She also talks about her black student, Michelle, who had pointed to a picture in a book saying: “I wished I looked like her” (p.12). The “her” referred to a blond, pink-cheeked girl in the book Paley was reading. Paley does not ignore Michelle’s wish, as she had the same wish when she was little, so she explains:

“Michelle, I know how you feel. When I was little I also would have liked to look like this little girl. She doesn’t look like anyone in my family, so I couldn’t have looked like her. Sometimes, I wish I had smooth brown skin like yours. Then I could always be dark and pretty.” (p.12)

Paley’s comment made Michelle and her classmates look at her skin. Her true feelings for and recognition of Michelle as a black girl show her respect and care for every child’s individuality. To her, a child can easily feel anxious when he feels there is something different about him that cannot be attended to casually, naturally, and uncritically by the teacher. Such an anxiety can then be an obstacle to learning. Paley sends this message that it is acceptable to be different. She creates an environment in classroom that reproduces the acceptance of individual differences and cultural diversity.

Paley shows us that it is vital to recognize private identities that diverse students bring into the classroom. It is the teacher’s role to teach students how to negotiate and

compromise their private self while encountering “unknown others”. In the public space of school, the private self must learn to come in negotiation with diverse identities that come together in a common place and become less narcissistic and more sharing. While students learn to give up a bit of their private identity and compromise in schools, their individualities and private identifications still need to be protected. In order to get recognition from the teacher as the authority figure in the classroom and their classmates, students can ‘become’ like those in classroom who are more likeable or popular and overlook those aspects of their private identities that they think are less desirable.

Moreover, students can easily get labeled and categorized in schools. Since they look and struggle for recognition, they can ‘become’ those labels. Students can be called obedient, naughty, slow, at risk, smart, fast, dumb, among others, according to teachers’ preferences. The problem is that it is likely that students accept these labels and internalize the related images. They will be alienating themselves from their true being and believing in such misrecognitions. Hence Paley warns teachers to be careful about recognizing every student’s uniqueness. Every student should feel that he/she is understood, valued, and recognized regardless of his/her gender, race, class, and ethnicity. Differences should be treasured.

Conclusion

This paper examined the concept of recognition using Taylor’s and Bingham’s theories on recognition and mirroring. The main idea is that human beings need recognition, and positive mirror recognition should be practiced in the public place of school. Throughout the paper, I discussed the term ‘identity’ from Taylor’s perspective to explain the importance of recognition. As Taylor argues, while we are individual subjects, we are part of a ‘we’. Our identities are shaped through the dialogues we have with significant others in the private sphere and it is important to us how our significant others want to see us. Our self-descriptions, identities, values, and beliefs will vary since the definitions we have been given and our dialogues with others are different. The notion of recognition is about recognizing people’s distinctive selves and identities, and it is crucial to do that in the *public* space. People *need* public recognition for who they are as human beings as well as for their cultural practices and values; i.e., for ‘where they are coming from’.

School is a public place where recognition matters. We should acknowledge not only the students’ basic rights as human beings, regardless of their gender, race, class, or ethnicity, but also their practices and needs as members of specific cultural groups. Teachers need to practice ‘the politics of difference’ in classrooms while treating their students equally.

Taylor’s idea on multicultural curricula is to respect all cultures and represent all students equally and mirror positively. In Bingham’s words, students need someone or something to mirror back to them an affirming sense of who they are. Classroom can be comparable to a large mirror and we need to ensure that all students are mirrored there. Mirroring can be done textually or interpersonally. An inclusive and diverse curriculum

reflects the selves of students so that they can “see” themselves in written texts. Textual mirroring is important since students’ selves or identities are involved in what they learn. This is due to the dialogical nature of the self, as Taylor mentions; i.e., because our selves are formed in relation to the dialogues we have with others.

Interpersonal mirroring is done through teachers and other students. In the public place of school, students experience the transition of interpersonal mirror recognition from the private sphere to a larger society; thus, one may experience different mirroring in the private sphere than in the public sphere. If the image a person is given at school is a kind of misrecognition, it can do damage to the student’s identity. What the student knows of himself/herself at home is different from what he/she knows at school.

Therefore, it is important to apply both textual and interpersonal recognition in public places such as schools and pay attention to their effect on one’s identity as well as his/her learning, as identity and learning are intertwined. I believe learning is mainly about identity and identification. In order to make deep learning happen, people’s identities need to be recruited (Wenger, 1998; Gee, 2004). To engage one’s identity in a learning context, students’ identities with different social and cultural backgrounds should be recognized and valued. This requires us to not only practice mirror recognition positively, but also consider the *positions* students have been imposed throughout their life, as students’ identities can be constructed socially and culturally through powerful discourses that are related to their gender, class, or race.

Students need to recognize the subject positions and labels that they have been assigned by authority figures. This is because students internalize these misrecognitions and such labels can change their life forever as they will only identify themselves through those positions and images. Similarly, Paley explains that stereotypes and labels are threats to children’s sense of worth and belonging. Since students struggle for recognition in school, they can act like those labels and take on those identities. Paley emphasizes the role of teachers in recognizing students for who they are and their differences.

Therefore, students’ diverse identities need to be acknowledged in the public place of school. Students need recognition and positive mirror recognition should be practiced and nurtured among people in schools. Recognition is a matter of human dignity, and decisions whose story is told and heard and whose is left out in schools, can be crucial to who is recognized and whose dignity is sustained. Human beings deserve dignity and the dignity of students of various cultural groups needs to be fostered in schools.

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