



**Schools of Recognition: Identity Politics and Classroom Practices.** Charles Bingham. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001. 176 pp.

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*Schools of Recognition* explores the importance and complexity of human recognition, defined as the act of acknowledging and coming to be acknowledged by others, and the implications of recognition for educational theory and practice. Combining Hegel's philosophical work with the insights of contemporary scholars from various fields, Bingham seeks to "construct an educational discourse of recognition" (p. 157). He argues that human recognition is essential to human dignity. Bingham locates himself in the narrative by referencing his work in teaching and teacher education and his own daughter's need for recognition in school.

Bingham's framework consists of four interrelated approaches, including "recognition and public dignity" (mirroring), "recognition of the unknowable other" (confirmation), "recognition and subjection" (lateral recognition), and "recognition and reciprocity" (reciprocal recognition). These approaches extend from four Hegelian questions, summarized by Bingham as follows:

- How does the modern person attain recognition in the public sphere?
- How can I recognize another when the other is in fact independent of me?
- What can I do if recognition of me is already a matter of subjection?
- What would reciprocity look like within the event of recognition?

The first approach, "recognition and public dignity," draws heavily on liberal political philosophy and current literature in multicultural education, insisting that each person needs to be recognized, to see him- or herself reflected in the public sphere. This approach speaks to the need for a curriculum that mirrors the diversity of our pluralistic communities. Second, "recognition of the unknowable other," based largely on existentialist philosophy, asserts that there are limits to which one human being can ever truly "know" another. Acknowledging these limits, the task here is to confirm the unknowable other. Third, "recognition and subjection" draws on feminist and poststructural philosophy to demonstrate that recognition inevitably involves



subjection. Because we are born into a world of preexisting discursive categories, any language we might select to claim a subjective identity necessarily entails the risk of subjection. Since we cannot function without language, it is imperative to recognize that communication and identity exist in lateral relation to one another. Finally, "recognition and reciprocity," drawing on the literature in psychoanalysis to address the relationship between mind and society, posits that meaningful recognition is necessarily mutual. The critical point is that the one recognized is also one recognizing. As long the other is perceived as an object, a psychic extension of oneself, recognition (in the sense of knowing another) is not possible. The only knowing that can occur is self-knowing, a process that accords no affirmation to an other. Only by regarding the other as a recognizing subject can meaningful recognition occur. Bingham contends that these four approaches should be viewed as a cognitive constellation rather than a set of competing theories. Taken together, these approaches constitute a language with which we may begin to contemplate recognition as a vital aspect of educational discourse and practice.

#### Strengths, Weaknesses, and Contribution to the Field

This book is well worth reading. The philosophical questions are substantive, the theory base is sound, and the argument is thoughtfully constructed. Rather than positing a remedy to be studied and applied, recognition is presented as an important, complex, and potentially perilous aspect of human experience with which we must grapple in an ongoing conversation. Bingham's treatment of recognition as a constellation of interrelated ideas, rather than a set of competing theoretical alternatives, permits the reader to interpret and integrate without feeling the need to identify a best or most-accurate perspective. This approach is consistent with the author's recognition of the existence and importance of multiple perspectives within our pluralistic society.

Although substantive and well organized, a somewhat dense and disjunctive writing style and the occasional use of forced metaphors (e.g., "the following chapters will weave the warp of our analytic framework against the weft of school experience" p. 24) may limit the desirability of the text for many potential beneficiaries--for example, busy classroom practitioners. On a related note, although educational literature is woven throughout the text, a scant 14 pages is provided at the end of the book for an explicit discussion of implications for practice. Finally, although Bingham does a fine job of integrating his theoretical references without privileging the views



of one over another, he is less charitable to the straw men he uses to establish and analyze his case for schools of recognition (e.g., the actions of the white teacher involved in the widely publicized *Nappy Hair* incident in Brooklyn, New York). Although it is certainly important to identify views and practices that threaten the dignity of others, is it not plausible that even the authors of oppressive thoughts and actions--most human beings, at one time or another--may operate within limiting (albeit dominant) contexts of their or our own?

Aside from my concerns about the accessibility of the text and the author's failure to humanize those with whom he strongly disagrees, this work is valuable both for research and teaching. The author's case for the relationship between recognition and dignity provides a compelling rationale for ongoing research on the nature, significance, and complexities of human recognition in education and society, and his suggestion that recognition needs to be conceived as part of what it means to be a good teacher provides an equally persuasive case for pedagogy. Engaging in the conversation of recognition, as conceived in this text, would go a long way toward replacing the technocracy and tyranny of contemporary educational scholarship and practice with a focus on human dignity and mutual respect as a basis for making sense of the world we share.

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