The possibility of mutual recognition: What we can learn from the tragedy of Achilles

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Much has been written about mutual recognition in educational scholarship and its potential to deliver education that is enriching, not remedial, and re-latable, not irrelevant (see, for example, Fellner et al., 2024; hooks, 1994). In the United States, the necessity of this pedagogical practice has mostly focused on classrooms serving students of color though it is needed in all educational settings. Mutual recognition embraces students getting to know them-selves and each other through dialogic education. It aims to cat-alyze awareness of one's position in the world, the first step in positively transforming one's own reality and thus of reality itself. Mutual recognition also highlights the vital importance of guid-ing students and teachers to acknowledge each other in their full authenticity, which is especially challenging when they are di-vided by race, culture and the experiences of daily life.

In the United States today, aspects of mutual recognition have been incorporated into school curricula, most prominently in the form of social-emotional learning, which is seen as a "primary goal of education" (Cipriano et al., 2022, p. 74) and in programs of restorative justice (Anfara Jr. et al., 2013). Social-emotional learning has mostly focused on classrooms serving students

considered to be at risk (Bierman et al., 2010; Cipriano et al., 2022), and though it has many important elements, including helping students monitor and control their own behavior (Bierman et al., 2010), it has been accused of ignoring issues of race and cultural differences (Cipriano et al., 2011). Though there has been relatively little research about restorative justice programs in schools (Mustian et al., 2022), they theoretically share a more critical lens than social-emotional programs in that they consider the role of institutional power and systems of justice in mediating student behavior and seek an alternative to punitive disciplinary measures to resolve conflicts (Anfara Jr. et al., 2013). The most popular methods of restorative justice "include derivations of peer juries, peace circles, and restorative conversations and conference" with the goal of building "community and shared trust and then work to restore and reconnect people within the community when damage or harm occurs" (Mustian et al., 2022, p. 53). There is a body of existing research that questions the success of both social-emotional and restorative justice programs (Cipriano et al., 2022; Mustian et al., 2022). Additionally, even in conception, these programs ignore the chiasm in life experiences that often divide teachers from students and thus they undermine the spirit of mutuality that is essential to the concept of mutual recognition as it applies to schools.

The practice of mutual recognition, unlike social-emotional curricula, cannot be an imposed or formulaic method of instruction, but as seems true for the success of restorative justice programs as well (Mustian et al., 2022), it must be genuinely embraced as the foundation of pedagogical interactions by educators. To further mutual recognition within educational settings – among students and between students and teachers – teachers need to facilitate an environment in which all participants engage dialogically with each other in the spirit of "strict equality," which is how Hannah Arendt (2004, p. 434) characterized the relationship between Socrates and his students. These dialogs, these "talking things through" (p. 434) with others, aim to catalyze self-knowledge along with empathy for what one's dialogic partners

are experiencing given their positions in our common world. For mutual recognition to become manifest in classroom relationships, and for participants to see or come to see each other in the spirit of "strict equality," they must feel they are in a compassionate space in which they can speak honestly and in which they have the time and opportunity to safely engage with others in self-reflection that may be uncomfortable. I, often with my colleague and with my students (Fellner et al., 2024), have written articles about mutual recognition as it has been enacted in our classrooms in Newark, New Jersey. That work has leaned on the scholarship of such educators as Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Lisa Delpit, all of whom might be considered teachers in the Socratic tradition and all of whom believed the practice of mutual recognition could create a pathway to a more just and equitable world.

The term mutual recognition itself, and the importance of practicing it within schools, are mostly associated with bell hooks (1994) and her book *Teaching to transgress*. She writes that mutual recognition demands "recognizing one another's presence" (p. 8) and seeing every person as a full human being ("in their particularity as individuals") (p. 7) with a voice that is worthy of being heard, acknowledged and welcomed. hooks' articulation of the importance of mutual recognition rests on her childhood educational experience in a one-room segregated schoolhouse in Kentucky. Her teachers valued their students' intellectual and emotional growth, knew their families, shared cultural practices, and taught with an orientation founded on historical knowledge of the African American experience. In the introduction to her book, hooks writes that her belief in her own unlimited possibilities was nurtured by a collective ethos that affirmed every individual's worth and ability to shape their future. Education was enriching, empowering and relatable; it enhanced community love and solidarity, which in turn fostered individual exceptionality. School, she writes, was "a place of ecstasy" and learning was a "joy" (p. 3). That all changed with integration. The recognition between students and between students and teachers that seemed organically woven throughout her childhood education

came to a sudden halt. Black teachers were fired, and instruction was conducted by white teachers unfamiliar with their students, their history or their culture and often disdainful of them. Her new white teachers did not "recognize" the presence of their Black students, did not see them as "full human beings," and did not value their voices. Obedience to authority replaced love of learning. There was no mutual recognition or even an attempt at attaining it.

This lack of mutual recognition between teachers and students remains a major obstacle in education today. Dishearteningly, the differences in the life experiences between teachers and school administrators, who are mostly white (Schaeffer, 2024) in the United States, and their students of color, and the perceptions arising from those differences, combined with the official power dynamics inherent in the classroom and the society it reflects, too often lead to an absence of recognition, miscommunication and conflict. This is evidenced in the great disproportion of Black students who are suspended, arrested on school property (Ferguson, 2001; Gregory et al., 2010) and misclassified with the most subjective disabilities (learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, speech and language disabilities) and thus excluded from the general student population (fortifying the school-to-prison pipeline) (Annamma, 2016; Merkwae, 2015), or simply leave school because they find it irrelevant to their lives (Coates, 2015; Dumas, 2014; Fellner, 2019). Many come to see schools as alien territory (Bruner, 1996; Coates, 2015; Dickar, 2008; Dumas & ross, 2016) rather than as a place where they are recognized, that place of "ecstasy" which hooks (1994) experienced during her early school days. As one of my 7th-grade African American students told me, "I don't know what they talking about [in school]; give me something real." Dumas (2014, p. 2) writes that for many Black students, school "is a site of suffering."

Just recently, I finished the new Emily Wilson translation of the Iliad (Homer, 2017), Homer's epic about the Trojan War. As I

was reading it, the war between Israel and Hamas continued (as it still does as of this writing), atrocities exciting further atrocities. As a child of two Holocaust refugees and the grandchild of Holocaust victims on both my parents' sides, the events in Israel and Gaza were particularly painful to me. I remember my mother watching the televised images from the 1982 massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Seeing the fleeing Palestinians, she turned to me aghast and said, "They look just like we looked." Forty years later, reading about the destruction of Troy and witnessing the destruction of Gaza, both "sites of suffering" (Dumas, 2014), and as I think of my own history, I feel the urgency of seeking mutual recognition as an alternative to violent confrontation, not only in our schools but in the larger world as well.

Achilles and his inability to sustain recognition

Homer's Iliad, commonly dated to the 8th Century BC, recounts a brief period towards the end of the 10-year Trojan War that took place about 400 years earlier, in the 12th or 13th century. The war pitted the Greek people, known as the Achaeans and led by King Agamemnon, against the people of Troy, led by King Priam. As the Iliad begins, we are told of how King Agamemnon insulted the honor of the famous warrior Achilles, the epic's protagonist, by taking for himself the "trophy wife," Briseis, that Achilles won in battle. In revenge, Achilles refuses to participate in the war that the Greeks cannot win without him. The Iliad's central storyline revolves around Achilles' refusal to fight, followed by his furious re-entry into battle when his dearest friend, Patroclus, is slain by Hector, Priam's son.

In one scene, Achilles reflects on his own self-defeating fury at King Agamemnon, telling his mother:

> I wish anger did not exist. Even the wisest people are
> roused to rage, which trickles into you sweeter than

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honey, and inside your body it swells like smoke"
(Homer, 2017, p. 443).

Later, avenging the killing of Patroclus by Hector, Achilles tells his dead friend:

> And I will choose twelve lovely Trojan children and slit their throats about your funeral pyre because I am so angry at your death. (p. 451)

Spoken as story nearly 3000 years ago, Achilles could be a stand-in for the leaders of both Hamas and Israel, one atrocity begetting an even greater atrocity. Wilson comments:

> People subsumed by rage try to replicate the wrongs they have suffered by hurting others. … The enraged want to humiliate, hurt, or kill. (xLiii)

There is another contrasting scene in the Iliad where the old warrior Nestor, in an effort to get Achilles to join the war against Troy or to at least get Patroclus to fight in his stead, tells Patroclus, "Perhaps some god will bless your words, and you will touch his heart and change his mind" (Homer, 2017, p. 273). In this particular instance, Nestor successfully uses words to foment more violence and to inflict more suffering on the men, women and children – the poor and unglorified – of both the Trojan and the Achaean allies. And so words, as all dictatorial and populist leaders know, can contagiously sway masses towards hate and violence that primarily serve the interests of power and control. And indeed, in the Iliad, there are countless examples of the epic's "heroes" rousing the masses of unnamed and unremembered soldiers to fight and die, leaving their families bereft, without any chance of acquiring the honor or immortal fame that both Achilles and Hector will amass. There is only one moment in the Homeric epic in which an exchange of words, a dialog, actually leads to some type of mutual recognition and change of heart. That is when Priam, Hector's father, begs Achilles to release to him his son, whom Achilles killed and whose body he abused, so that he can give him a proper funeral. For a moment, a speck of time in

the decade-long war, words are able to stir self-reflection and awareness of the common humanity that binds the two enemies together. Priam and Achilles, weeping together and mourning the deaths of those they loved, see themselves in each other. That spark of mutual recognition, ushering in a brief truce, is the only one in this epic of carnage that suggests that it is possible for enemies to talk as friends, and for the world to be different, and better, than it is.

That Achilles and Priam were able to perceive and actually feel each other's pain through sharing their own personalized and particular grief suggests the power of face-to-face dialog to transcend the fury, fear and bitterness of enmity engraved over time. And yet the fragility of that power can easily lead to despair. Aristotle believed friendship was more important than justice because one didn't need justice among friends (Arendt, 2004; Aristotle, 1994), but even among friends who genuinely love and care for one another, as countless political family discussions and historic wars that have divided families attest to, love is unreliable as a mediator, and justice can be elusive. And, in the case of Achilles and Priam, who were marked as enemies but had a chance to pursue friendship, dialog and empathy had its limits. Aware of the commonalities in their experiences and feelingly cognizant of the truth that the other carried but also of a greater truth that embraced them both, they could have seized the moment to cease hostilities, celebrate their acknowledged and shared humanity, and explore the possibilities of living together in peace. But their brief recognition of their commensurate griefs could not overcome the overarching values of their time that elevated personal glory, power and wealth over collective welfare, peace and justice; indeed, these latter values were not even within the theoretical grasp of those warrior-heroes. And so, after a short agreed-upon time of mutual mourning, Achilles and Priam reasserted the exterminatory destruction that would lead to both their deaths and those of countless and unconsidered others.

In our own era, with existential crises embedded in the attraction
of authoritarianism at home and abroad and the annihilation of
Gaza, the inability of dialog to resolve different perceptions of
our common reality, even between friends we know and love, has
been very much on our minds even as we recognize that our con-
flicting views are shaped by our different positions and experi-
ences in the world. And so, the Aristotelian sense that friendship
makes justice unnecessary (Arendt, 2004; Aristotle, 1994) seems
distant from our own experiences where friendship, because it is
so personally sustaining, survives scarred but triumphant over
agreement as to the nature of justice though at the cost of aban-
doning the quest for shared visions of how to better the world we
live in together.

It is therefore sobering to reflect on the difficulties inherent in the
dialogic process that seeks to build agreement even among friends
who share similar values and commitments. More elusive yet is
dialog's power to have friendship transcend enmity. And if the
Israelis and the Palestinians, both of whom have an historically
embodied knowledge of what it feels like to be dispossessed, dis-
criminated against and decimated, cannot see the world as it
opens itself up (Arendt, 2004), with all its grief and suffering, to
their enemy, and if they cannot set aside their fury and somehow
suture their deeply rooted existential trauma to move forward to-
gether, then it seems that little has changed since Achilles and
Priam looked into each other's hearts, found and then discarded
their spark of recognition, and returned to rage and slaughter.

The dialogic process as a path towards mutual recognition

It is in the tradition of Socratic teaching to use dialogic question-
ing to guide students to understand their own thinking, their own
view of our one world and the conditions and experiences that
have shaped it. Socrates saw himself as a "midwife" for the
thoughts of his students, someone who could help his students
give birth to their own understanding of how the world

"appeared to them," (Arendt, 2004), a revelation that was only possible through dialog with others based, as previously cited, upon "strict equality" (p. 434) between participants. Without that authentic back and forth, without "talking things through" (p. 434) as a method of inquiry rather than judgment, his students were in danger of blindly accepting the commonly held narrative of reality and the ideas that sustained it rather than learning how to reason for themselves and to align their contradictory thoughts and feelings in a way that both acknowledged and transcended their particular circumstances and contexts. Hannah Arendt writes that for Socrates, in order for a person to be able to know themselves and thus take a step towards authentically knowing others, they had to discover "the truth of their own opinions," (p. 434) – mediated, necessarily, by their own position in the world and the complexity of truth itself.

Of course, Socrates' students were "those who have the most leisure, the sons of the wealthiest" (Plato, 1979), and Socrates himself was not an advocate of democracy or concerned with the welfare of the "common people" (Stone, 1979). But in our time, educators like Paulo Freire, bell hooks and Lisa Delpit, have written about authentic dialog as a liberatory practice to achieve recognition of both self and others, even when doing so threatens our ideals and conceptions of who we are. Paulo Freire, sounding very Socratic, wrote that the "task of the dialogical teacher," is to "represent that universe to the people from whom she or he first received it, and "re-present" it "not as a lecture but as a problem" (1970, p. 109). In this way, Freire approached his first students, the peasants of Brazil, in the spirit of "strict equality," refusing to tell them how they felt or to judge them. Rather, through his questioning of what they told him, and through their questioning of each other, he excited them to collectively decipher their own thinking and thus question hegemonic thought. Just as Achilles was trapped within the dominant value system of his time, Freire noted that current dominant values trapped his students within ideas that served to oppress them and their communities, and that they needed to "emerge" from that situation in

order to "intervene" in their reality and thus become activists in the shaping of their world. Freire helped them realize, for example, through dialogic engagement, that if their idea of success matched those of their land-owning bosses, there would never be any real change in the world. Under those conditions, they could never come to recognize their true selves or the truths that others carried. And justice would remain a mere dream rather than a lived experience.

Mutual recognition and the durability of embedded attitudes

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu thought that a person's values, ideas and attitudes "were unconsciously acquired over time through socialization in particular fields of activity and social life" (Fellner & Kwah, 2018). Many of these, like those prioritizing individual wealth and power over community health and welfare, and tribal-like allegiances, were almost impossible to transform given the overwhelming power of established political, economic and social structures that are infused with those values and which we are born or migrate into (Bourdieu, 2000b; Fellner & Kwah, 2018). We adhere to these values automatically as we live our lives unless some epiphanic experience or cataclysmic event loosens their hold. Bourdieu allowed for the existence of contradictions between the dominant values in different fields of activity (home, job, school, recreation etc.), and that the resolution of these contradictions could modify a person's attitudes. Still, the dominance of hegemonic ways of seeing the world are so fully embodied; so innately integrated into our beings through an alignment of mind, body and spirit; so familiar, habitual and taken-for-granted, that he doubted that values fundamentally clashing with these deeply internalized ones could be advanced through explicit pedagogy alone. bell hooks is also skeptical that intellectual instruction by itself can lead to the transformation of hegemonic values and practices or divergences from what Bourdieu called "the rules of the game" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 183). Still,

in contrast to and more optimistically than Bourdieu, hooks believes in the possibility of transformation through a process of mutual recognition through which "two individuals see each other as they really are" (2009, p. 183). As hooks (1994) implies and as Arendt (2004) emphasizes, this process ideally happens between two individuals, as in the case of Achilles and Priam.

In schools, however, where numerous individuals in multiple settings interact, and even more so in society at large, where multiple truths and multiple visions of justice encounter each other, it is far more complicated to engage in authentic and reflexive dialog that will reveal the "truth" of the opinions that participants hold. These multiple truths are highlighted by such writers as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015), James Baldwin (1962), Christine Sharpe (2016) and Saidiya Hartman (Hartman, 1997) who all illuminate the radically different ways in which, generally speaking, African Americans and white Americans perceive the ideals that American society proclaims to uphold, the concrete conditions on the ground that confront those ideals, and the role that schools play in reproducing and perpetuating inequalities. Mutual recognition, and the dialog needed to facilitate it, are challenged by these tensions and the resulting "thin cultural coherence" (Sewell Jr., 2005, p. 166) to some of the "rules of the game" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 183). It is further and formidably challenged by the familiarity and durability of established structures and the role of power in their maintenance. Additionally, mutual recognition confronts the understandable fear of the privileged of losing their place in the social hierarchy even when they may believe abstractly in the equal rights and dignity of others, the logical resistance of the oppressed and the unrecognized to opening themselves up to those with more power, and the seeming unquenchable desire of all classes of people, to identify success with what the powerful have attained and accumulated (Freire, 1970) .

The educator, Lisa Delpit, articulates, better than maybe anyone else, the challenge of fully recognizing one another, especially when there is an imbalance in power, experience and economic

security. Like hooks (1994), she believes authentic dialog can unveil a new awareness of one's own abilities to see beyond deeply ingrained attitudes, beyond the established lenses of race, class, gender, and national customs and allegiances. Barring being struck by some instant epiphanic empathy between participants (which hooks (2009) allows is possible), Delpit (1988) writes that for mutual recognition to be successfully actualized in schools, it has to be initiated by those with official power and sustained by dialog that touches the heart as well as the mind. She emphasizes the importance of radical listening on the part of white teachers as they converse with the Black parents of their students, an implicit receptivity to see them in the "spirit of full equality." Such radical listening, which Ken Tobin defines as seeing the world from the place of the other (C. Ali Kahn, personal communication, June 3, 2009), is needed in order to feel, and be, activated by the "truth" of their opinions.

> To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment- and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (Delpit, 1988, p. 297)

Delpit focuses on the enormous self-work it takes to become, at least temporarily, "an empty vessel", which is how Socrates described himself, so that we can be filled and activated by the truths of others. Only then can we see ourselves as others see us, and through that lens also feel what it means to be in their shoes. Only then do we have the possibility of investigating our own particular truths and so, through dialog, find a way to move forward together. While hooks, in particular, recognizes the

therapeutic aspects of radical listening and of genuinely welcoming everyone's voice, the success of mutual recognition needs to be anchored in an activist desire, shared by Freire, hooks and Delpit, to participate in a world that uplifts us all through furthering recognition of our common humanity. It is not, in other words, simply a question of method – of following a formulaic set of steps and rules. Rather, the practice of mutual recognition needs to be anchored in a vision and a deeply felt need to better all of our lives in a shared world. It is necessarily infused with improvisation and risk.

This does not in any way negate the necessity of the oppressed to demand a justice that serves and recognizes them in their full humanity.

The failure of Achilles

The tragic essence of Homer's story, and its relevance to us today, does not reside in its excess of violent heroics and endless killing (though that too resonates). Instead, it dwells in the moment in which the possibility of creating a different reality briefly flickered and was then snuffed out, a moment in which, as Aristotle (Arendt, 2004; Aristotle, 1994) suggested, a relationship based on friendship might have prevailed over the "rules of the game" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 183) with compassion replacing the vengeance and retribution that war and that era's rules of justice demanded. That new possibility, of humans living in the world together in peace, rested on mutual recognition rather than on the endless accumulation of possessions, the desire for individual glory, or the wounding of personal pride, all of which were important to Achilles but none one of which could, in any case, heal the trauma of loss. Mutual recognition shone in that unexpected moment in which Achilles and Priam saw each other in themselves and themselves in each other and were struck by how the one world appeared to them both in the same way despite the particularities of their personal grief. And it is in that instant of

fleeting awareness that the common humanness of Achilles eclipsed his invulnerable and godlike reputation, transcending time and myth to touch our hearts; this, despite our knowing of his past cruelty. Had that recognition endured, and even more profoundly, had it embraced the unseen and barely recognized masses who lacked his god-like status, a new reality could have come into being, one that embraced the universal recognition of each of us in our "strict equality." Such a conception, of course, could not spring from the ethos of that ancient time. But it is within our grasp today if we choose to embrace it.

We live in a world where tribal, ethnic, racial and religious identities too often still take precedence over our common human bond, and where power and personal wealth are still culturally disseminated values used to measure individual worth. In our dealings with each other, instead of defaulting to these habitual values and the practices that affirm them, we can learn from the best of Socrates, Freire, hooks and Delpit and seek, as Freire writes, to "emerge from submersion" rather than continue the seemingly endless cycle of terror, destruction, dehumanization and suffering. We will not likely shake the most powerful from their Achilles-like self-image, nor likely change the minds or touch the hearts of leaders who, like Achilles, seek to impose their personal vision of justice and truth on others, which is a recipe for cruelty and tyranny. Still, if the rest of us can pursue the goals of mutual recognition through dialogic engagement, then we have a possibility of transcending our current condition and mapping a way forward.

Mutual recognition, one that touches the heart as well as the mind and the body, even with all its fragility, uncertainty and enormous challenge, can help usher in a more just and inclusive world, one in which we see ourselves in each other and each other in ourselves and in which collective peace and well-being are elevated over individual excess. Freedom, as Merleau Ponty writes, "can only come about …by our going beyond our original situation…" (1993, p. 72). Achilles, unable to imagine such an option,

and too powerful and narcissistic to care about others, saw no reason to attempt that journey. We, who live at a time where the future of humanity is in peril, but also, fortunately, in a time where we can conceive of better ways of being together, must take a different path.

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