Unalienated Recognition as a Feature of Democratic Schooling

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ABSTRACT

The current era of standards and accountability in U.S. public schooling narrows recognition and assessment to an almost exclusive focus on the production of test scores as legitimate markers of student achievement. This climate prevents rather than encourages democratic forms of exchange within and across social worlds. Via a case study of one student's experience in a project on the civil rights movement, I present the concept of *unalienated recognition* to describe a form of democratic exchange that centers on what students produce through community-based projects.

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A well-dressed seventh grader stands nervously at the front door of her school. She and her classmates have spent weeks preparing for this moment: an interview with a member of the community who worked to end racial discrimination in the 1950s and 1960s. Her job this morning is to greet her interviewee at the door, welcome him to the school, and then walk him to the library for the interview. Although it is typical at this school for students to work alongside adults from the community, this student is experiencing unexpected nerves. She feels the pressure to "get it right"—to learn as much as possible from this man so she can accurately capture his story for the book she and her classmates will produce. She also is nervous to meet someone who is respected in the local community for his work on civil rights.

The interviewee is also nervous, but for different reasons. As he drives toward the school, he wonders how this diverse group of young people will react to his stories of racial violence, standing up for his beliefs, and what he considers to be his life's most important accomplishments. Will they care about his stories? Will they understand the complexities of the time period? Will they make connections to their own lives?

As student and interviewee meet, each relaxes a bit. The seventh grader is instantly put at ease with the man's silly joke, and the interviewee is impressed by the professionalism of this young person: articulate, well-dressed, and confident.

THE OPENING VIGNETTE DESCRIBES A MOMENT DURING A multimonth, interdisciplinary project in which seventh-grade students from Portland, Maine, explored lesser-known events of the civil rights movement. Students' concerted preparation and collective dedication to conducting interviews, writing narratives, and publicly showcasing their work demonstrated academic achievement that defied typical notions of what 12 and 13 year olds can accomplish. Students, teachers, and this school received local,

regional, and national attention for their work, including a proclamation from the Maine state legislature thanking them for capturing untold stories of the civil rights era and four students being asked to deliver a keynote address at a national conference in front of 800 educators.

Unlike what the opening story depicts, the current era of standards and accountability in U.S. public schooling narrows recognition and assessment to an almost exclusive focus on the production of test scores as legitimate markers of student achievement, teacher performance, and school quality. Despite some softening at the federal level (i.e., the recent granting of No Child Left Behind waivers to states, thus altering the goal of 100% proficiency by 2014), there appears no near end to high-stakes testing and related pressures felt by students, teachers, and schools. Within this national climate of constricted definitions of excellence and academic achievement, what some call an "audit culture" (e.g., Apple, 2007; Taubman, 2009), scholars devoted to democracy and education note the consequential decline of democratic practices in schools. Evidence of this ongoing turn away from explicit teaching of democratic principles includes increased time spent on math and language arts at the expense of social studies and civics or, as in Florida, leading to the outright dismissal of teaching critical thinking skills because of the purported obstruction to improving test scores (Westheimer, 2008). If part of the purpose of schooling

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is to engage students in democratic practices while readying them for democratic life, then it is necessary to find ways to engage children in practices that foster, rather than diminish, critical thinking and interactions within and across communities.

Although *democracy in schools* can take on different meanings, in this article I use Soder's (2001) discussion of "Conditions for Democracy" (p. 188) and "Characteristics of a Democratic People" (p. 195) as a starting point. He presents *exchange* as one of the necessary conditions for engaging in and maintaining democratic life, saying that *exchange* is "a way of building and sustaining relationships" (p. 190). Exchange is a give and take of resources, where ideas and materials move among people, where the balance and quality of these interchanges across individuals and groups of people matters.

In many schools, however, means for democratic exchange do not exist. Children do exchange their labor for a grade (Lave & Wegner, 1991): work is handed to teachers who, in return, provide numeric evaluation of their achievement. This type of exchange points toward student work as having value only as a means for progressing from one grade to the next or for a diploma. As Matusov (2011) states in a recent issue of *Democracy & Education*, "Activities and their outcomes in conventional schools usually do not have use-value for anybody" (p. 4). Confirming this, Sidorkin (2001) says, "The products of student work have *no utility*. The lack of motivation is a direct consequence of the fact that the things produced by students are useless" (p. 3).

Accordingly, systems of assessment, as they exist in most schools, prevent rather than encourage students—and teachers and the school as a whole—from forms of exchange that promote productive collaboration within and across social worlds. Typical practices instead do the opposite, alienating children and professionals from meaningful exchanges. In fact, the entire system of learning and assessment in schools is constructed around a model of exchange that promotes a cleavage between what students produce and who uses it. Here we see the consequences of what Lave and McDermott (2002) call *estranged learning*: students alienated from meaningful engagement in communities, where student labor is reduced to completing tasks that have little worth.

Despite the prevalence of what Sidorkin (2001) calls the "strange economy of the wastebasket" (p. 4), some forms of student work perforate the traditional boundaries of schooling and extend students, teachers, and the school as a whole into the community. In this article I examine a particular kind of student work—products and performances that have relevance in, and make tangible contributions to, the local community. More specifically, I make a case for student work—and the resulting recognition generated by children, teachers, the school, and the community—that is not shared just with people outside school but also with people who have stake in the substance and quality of what is produced.

Children in many schools, via projects of the sort I am describing, are expected to act like professionals and step into the role of experts such as scientists, historians, or journalists. In these cases, student work rarely approaches the sophistication of actual professionals; however, the point is more the pathway that is established rather than actually producing professional-quality work. For my purposes, *that* students are performing the role, or "doing theater," as one school administrator in my study described, affords a means of exchange between students and community-based experts.

School-based projects that involve children in, and contributing to, the community, are not new. However, in this article I offer an understanding of how and why these projects matter to individuals, schools, and communities by presenting a theoretical framework that merges sociocultural views of schooling with democratic aims. In contrast to approaches to democratic education that draw attention to what kids know (i.e., civics knowledge) or what kids do (i.e., service-learning), I mean to draw attention to what children produce as a crucial but sometimes overlooked feature of democratic educational practice. I elaborate on Soder's work by adding *recognition* as an integral part of the democratic exchange, contrasting it with e*xchange* in the form of commodity labor. I present these concepts through an empirical study that closely examines one student's experience in the previously mentioned civil rights project, focusing on what he produced and his relationship with his interviewee. My purpose is to articulate the developmental potential of recognition as democratic practice as well as present the notion of *unalienated recognition*—in which students, teachers, and the school as a whole develop through exchanges in which mutual acknowledgement for work in and for the community is connected to participation in "activities well tuned to the relations among people and their world" (Lave & McDermott, 2002, p. 38) rather than those that "align children within hierarchies that replicate injustices in the distribution of access and rewards" (Lave & McDermott, 2002, p. 21).

When students engage in exchange and create tangible artifacts exchanged across social worlds, a *public space* is produced. Although a longer analysis of *public* and *publicness* is beyond the scope of this article, I suggest that not only do particular forms of student work have value in the public space but the work itself comes to constitute a public space. Through my case analysis, I illustrate how certain forms of student work can be construed as contributing toward the constitution of a public space and a democratic conception of publicness. This is fundamentally different from the major work of schools, which promote little public interaction other than what is viewed narrowly through the mandated reporting of test scores and related school report cards known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). This conception of publicness can be expressed as such: "Public schools are not merely schools *for* the public, but schools of publicness: institutions where we learn what it means to *be* a public" (Barber, 1998, p. 225). My contention is that a publicness of the sort Barber describes can be understood as a function of children's work in schools, that what they produce promotes or inhibits democratic education. I propose recognition as a necessary feature of democratic schooling—where students' recognition is unalienated and where their work constitutes a public space—rather than the continued foreclosing of opportunities for exchange within and across social worlds.

Theoretical Framework

The study described in this article was guided by a sociocultural view of learning, specifically the concepts of artifacts, boundary objects, and children being recognized as legitimate members of a community. The focus on recognition as a quality of socially meaningful interaction draws on Miettinen's (2005) concept of the "desire for recognition" as an explanatory principle of what animates human activity and learning.

MAKING STUDENT WORK PUBLIC

Most work that students produce in school has no use value and is only exchanged for a grade. However, in schools where the following hold true, there is a significant shift in how students are recognized and what they are recognized for: (a) student work is purposefully shared with an audience beyond the teacher; (b) students know from the beginning that their products and performances will be shared within and outside the school; and (c) the substance of student work has meaning for audience members.

A sociocultural perspective on learning and development is a way to theoretically examine these processes. Although there are differences within various sociocultural frameworks, there are consistencies across theories (Roth & Lee, 2007), including: (a) a shift in the unit of analysis away from the individual and toward the collective; (b) in a two-way interaction, a person is impacted by context and context is inevitably changed by that person; (c) knowledge is shared among people and across objects and time and thus "neither learning nor development is an individual accomplishment" (Holzman, 2006, p. 8); and (d) artifacts, tools, and objects are seen as mediating devices essential to understanding the complexities of any system, including classrooms and schools (McDonald, Huong, Higgins, & Podmore, 2005). By examining the situation as a whole, across time and levels rather than as a set of isolated components, everyday classroom interactions can be seen as cultural and historical phenomena. Students working in and alongside the community can be seen as artifact-mediated exchange, in which students and community-based experts create and use tools that enable work along varying purposes.

ARTIFACTS AND BOUNDARY OBJECTS

Artifacts play a central role within the constructs of sociocultural theories and in the daily life of classrooms and schools. Examples of student work—especially culminating products and performances—are artifacts not just of the seemingly static demonstration of students' academic accomplishment but also of the tangible and lasting evidence of the process. Artifacts, as Hodder (2003) states, "endure physically and thus can be separated across space and time from its author, producer, or user" (p. 155); studying the ways artifacts are produced, used, and interpreted in schools pushes an understanding of student-generated artifacts as potential cultural tools, ones that translate meaning and promote exchange within and across social worlds.

In this way, publicly showcased student work affords a means for people from different communities to communicate cross-purposes, collaborate, and mutually acknowledge each other's contributions. Thus, student work can be considered boundary objects—artifacts and concepts that connect people (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Boundary objects, which Star and Griesemer (1989) describe as a "key process in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds" (p. 393), provide one entrée into the interactions among students and community members that are produced through community-based projects. In a recent review of research on boundary objects, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) emphasize, "All learning involves boundaries" (p. 132). Based on their analysis of conceptual and empirical research about boundary objects and boundary crossings, they present mechanisms that "constitute the learning potential" (p. 142). Student work has the potential to serve in many of the ways these authors describe, including as connecting communicatively by establishing the means through which people from different communities collaborate, enhancing boundary permeability by creating conduits between related, but different, social worlds, and perspective making by "coming to realize and explicate differences between practices and thus to learn something new about their own and others' practices" (p. 144–145).

RECOGNITION FROM A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

When artifacts of student work are transformed from no use value to that of boundary objects, moments of what I am terming "unalienated recognition" become possible. From a sociocultural perspective, *recognition* describes the process whereby people are seen as contributing members of a community of which they are a part (Miettinen, 2005). Recognition can be understood subjectively as need or, as Miettinen (2005) describes, the "artifact-mediated desire for recognition" (p. 53). Miettinen (2005) further argues that recognition is not just a consequence of participation, but rather something that propels people toward further participation. Importantly, however, recognition is not only subjective but also an objective feature of meaningful participation in social practices, realized though making one's work public:

> *An individual becomes universally recognized by participating in cultural activities, and this participation is objectified in the products of her acts (inscriptions, memos, drawings, scientific papers . . . .). These achievements constitute the objectified demonstration of the capabilities of the individual to contribute to the vitality of the community. (Miettinen, 2005, p. 63)*

In Miettinen's view, when people—individually and collectively—make skilled contributions to the "vitality of the community" (p. 63), their sense of self and community is transformed.

In schools, some scholars have identified a similar dynamic through the incorporation of audience as a motivating factor for students. Magnifico (2010) discusses how the process of writing changes when audience is incorporated as a feature of curriculum design:

> *Young writers . . . . are seen through the lens of what they contribute [emphasis added]. In this sense, it is much easier for them to gain recognition [emphasis added] for their expertise and accomplishments . . . . As a result of this active audience collaboration and feedback*

(which stands in contrast to the more passive, evaluative feedback of grades and teacher comments), this writing feels consequential, motivating, and interesting. (p. 179–180)

There are connections here between the role of audience and the recognition that students, teachers, and the school generate and receive—how both are inseparable from interaction with, and in, the community. When students perform their work for and with community members, they develop a relationship with a local audience. With a so-called authentic audience, not only do students have people who are interested in their work but there are also tangible *social* consequences if they produce something of shoddy, or even mediocre, quality (e.g., letting people down or embarrassing one's self). If, however, students produce something of value, the social consequence becomes recognition for their contributions and acknowledgement that they are a participating member of the community.

In what follows I present empirical evidence of the trajectory of recognition across one student's experience in an academic project, the heart of which was a relationship between the student and a community-based expert. This case offers an exemplification of student work as a pathway for unalienated recognition as a critical feature of democratic exchange in schools.

Methodology

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

As part of an extensive 18-month investigation of one school's 23-year history of reform efforts, I explored one student's participation in an exemplary project on the civil rights movement.[1] In the spring of 2010, 80 students and their teachers from King Middle School in Portland, Maine, undertook a four-month investigation of Portland community members' contributions to ending racial discrimination. The project, called Small Acts of Courage (aka Small Acts), consisted of the following phases: 1) building background knowledge about the civil rights movement; 2) developing questions and conducting interviews with community members; 3) turning interviewees' stories into written narratives; 4) publishing student writing in a four-volume anthology that was donated to a local university's African American special-collection library and given to interviewees; and 5) presenting findings to community members in an end-of-expedition event.

This school and project were selected for several reasons. First, King Middle School had sustained an innovative program of reform for over 20 years and had been heralded as a national example of whole-school reform within a network of schools that followed the model called Expeditionary Learning (EL).[2] Second, King Middle School was the most racially, ethnically, and economically diverse middle school in Maine. The school's demographics had shifted considerably over the last 20 years, from approximately 3% of students coming from minority backgrounds to over 50%. In part the result of waves of refugees from African countries and the services the city of Portland provided to newly arrived immigrants, in 2009–2010, 36% of King's students were born outside the United States, approximately 30 different languages were represented in the school, and 55% of students received free or reduced-price

lunch (Felton, 2010). Third, the content and guiding questions of the civil rights project had the potential to yield personal connections among the diverse group of students at King.

Through this project, Michael,[3] a seventh grader at King Middle School, established a lasting relationship with a distinguished member of the local community, which afforded Michael a particular kind of recognition. Michael's family emigrated to the United States when he was a baby from the Republic of Congo to escape war.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

I used a grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis (as per Charmaz, 2006) and, accordingly, data collection and analysis were iterative and co-occurred. The empirical evidence and analysis of Michael's case are based on the following data: (a) 10 classroom observations; (b) 35 video recordings of whole-class discussions; (c) 19 digital audio recordings of Michael's small group work; (d) two interviews with Michael during Small Acts and three more over the course of the following year; (e) examination of the artifacts Michael and his classmates produced during the expedition; (f) five interviews with his social studies and language arts teachers; and (g) 25 days of ethnographic field work at the school level.

Data analysis consisted of initial and focused coding, starting with a modified line-by-line approach—I did not create a code for each somewhat arbitrary line of fieldnotes or transcripts but instead coded relevant episodes—and in part used in-vivo codes that relied on people's actual words (Saldana, 2009). I used focused coding to build categories through a process of ongoing and extensive memoing while using the constant comparative method during initial rounds of coding. Throughout, I created and refined codes by using the grounded theory method of comparing data with data and comparing data to codes. Using a theoretical sampling process, I collected additional data based on initial findings and then refined (or not) categories based on a new round of theoretically based empirical instances. Finally, I used aspects of Clarke's (2005) situational analysis approach to assist me in "'opening up' the data and interrogating it in fresh ways" (p. 83).

Findings

Although there are many threads of Michael's story that emerged from my analysis, I focus in this article on themes related to recognition. The idea of recognition was pervasive spatially and temporally and across theoretical concepts. In this section I first share an overview of Michael as a student and then present three categories of recognition. In the section that follows, I discuss how these findings suggest the idea of unalienated recognition.

FROM MEDIOCRE TO SHINING STUDENT

Michael had a marbled history with schooling, sometimes engaged in academic work and sometimes not. This continued while he participated in Small Acts—for example, Michael's attention was mediocre during routine activities such as creating a timeline of important events or filling out an assessment rubric; however, overall throughout the project, Michael, as one of his teachers said,

"shined as though a spotlight was turned on behind him." With a self-proclaimed aptitude for historical knowledge, Michael was excited about learning not just about the big names of the civil rights era (which he said he had done in multiple grades) but also about the smaller stories that constituted the bulk of work in the movement. An African American, Michael made statements several times to the effect of, "Their actions allowed us to have the freedoms we have today."

Additionally, Michael was a frequent contributor to whole-class discussions—he was typically one of the first to raise his hand and sometimes was one of the only. Michael's hand was up so much during whole-class sessions that on several occasions the teacher said, "Let's not let Michael do all of the work for us here."

Michael's academic work gained momentum as tasks shifted to the joint production of interview questions and preparation for the interview with community member Gerald "Gerry" Talbot. Although Michael was not the strongest academically, his enthusiasm and dedication to getting the story was unsurpassed in his interview group. After conducting the interview, Michael labored over his written narrative. He said,

> I worked really hard on this story. We did the interview and we recorded it. And I probably listened to mine 50 [times] . . . . . Because sometimes I needed quotes and other times he might have said something I didn't understand. So I went back . . . . and listened and I still didn't understand so I had to go way back and listen to what he was saying leading up to that message . . . . I think that was hard because he had a lot to talk about and every single thing he said was really important. (Michael, personal communication, April 9, 2010)

Michael's quote characterizes the attention and energy he placed on accurately capturing his interviewee's story. At other times he shared that his commitment to the process was not just for the sake of presenting the story back to his interviewee but for meeting the larger goal of telling other people Talbot's story.

Michael's participation in, and attitudes toward, Small Acts defied a temporal progression: Much of his experience with his interviewee occurred after the project's official end, though his academic work (i.e., the production of artifacts) during the project set the stage for this extended opportunity. Over the year that spanned from the beginning of Small Acts through the winter of 2011, Michael's relationship with his interviewee evolved. His interviewee, a well-respected elder member of Portland's African American community, was an early president of the Portland branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the first Black Maine state legislator. At one point Michael said, "Well, me and Gerry, like, our relationship it's more than the expedition, more than the interviews and stuff. I've seen him outside of school, and I think we're pretty good friends" (Michael, personal communication, February 2, 2011). In what follows I present an analysis of several specific events that shaped Michael's ongoing relationship with Mr. Talbot. I use much of Michael's own words to articulate his thoughts and feelings to describe three types of recognitive moments: structured, unplanned, and enduring.

STRUCTURED MOMENTS OF RECOGNITION
At King Middle School, students showcase their learning at culminating events via tangible evidence (i.e., artifacts) with final performances of their work. For Small Acts, the event was an orchestrated, 80-student stage performance in which students took turns at the microphone sharing pieces of their written narratives. Their mini speeches flowed from one to the next and were accompanied by projected photographs of interviewees and recorded songs of the civil rights era. During and after this event, Michael was attuned to the attention he received from his interviewee, his interviewee's family, and other interviewees. In recalling this event, Michael said,

> [A teacher] told me, "Do you see him? He's focused on you." I was like, "Where?" And he pointed, and I was like, "Oh!"
>
> I had two speeches [at the event], ... and they were really focused and looking at me and then . . . . when it was someone else's turn to give the speech . . . . Gerald . . . . was still looking at me and . . . . his wife gave me a thumbs-up. And I just started smiling.
>
> After that, when we went to the library to have the snacks, [another interviewee] . . . . came up to me and shook my hand and said, "Great job. Keep doing what you're doing." And that was a very, like, inspiring moment for me. (Michael, personal communication, February 2, 2011)

These moments, in which Michael noticed being noticed, compelled him to say, "I think they really appreciated what we did. We took time out of our day to write and interview and learn about their stories—stories that most people don't know about—and I think they were proud of everyone" (Michael, personal communication, October 22, 2010). I call these "structured moments" because culminating events are an institutionalized feature of King in which students, teachers, and the school compelled community members to recognize them. How, and in what ways, these planned moments mattered was what was unpredictable.

UNPLANNED MOMENTS OF RECOGNITION
In addition to the structured aspects of Small Acts that fostered being noticed, Michael was afforded additional recognitive opportunities because of the proximity within which he and his interviewee lived. Although the meeting was brief, Michael placed importance on one chance encounter between the Talbots and himself on a summer day a few months after the culminating event:

> I was riding my bike . . . . and I saw Gerald and his wife and I stopped and I gave him a high five. And, before the interview started, he told me he has, like, a memory problem and he has a hearing problem, but as soon as I saw him, he remembered my name. And . . . . he took a while on my last name, but he got it. And so I gave him a handshake and I said, "Hi," and they're like, "How are things at King?" And I was like, "We haven't started school yet." And they are like, "OK." And I was like, "Thanks." And then I just left. (Michael, personal communication, October 22, 2010)

For Michael, it mattered that he was recognized, visually and by his first *and* last names, by someone he greatly respected and with whom Michael felt like he was developing a friendship.

ENDURING MOMENTS OF RECOGNITION
In the winter of 2011, 10 months after the end of Small Acts, students were invited to speak at the public unveiling of a portrait of Mr. Talbot at the Portland Public Library and attended by over 50 people. Afterward, Michael described the event as something he would never forget. When asked why the event was important to him, he said:

I wouldn't forget it because his daughter started crying after we all said what we had to say about Gerry . . . . . We all did a little speech thing, and she was trying to talk 'cause it was her turn to go up to the mic. She was trying to talk, but she really couldn't because she was crying, and I won't forget it 'cause all the like smiles I saw and all the people who looked really happy [in the audience] . . . . 'cause we care. And actually, there's this basketball league called AAU that I tried out for and Gerry's grandson . . . . he's actually the head coach and I saw him at the [unveiling] and I also saw him . . . . at the tryouts. And he just said "thank you" to me, and he said what we're doing at this school is really important and really special. (Michael, personal communication, February 3, 2011)

At this portrait unveiling, and in the interactions with Talbot's family members, Michael witnessed people deeply moved by students' caring about civil rights and local efforts to end racial injustice. Michael was touched by "all the smiles" and "all the people who looked really happy." Michael knew that people in the community—not just those present in the library audience—cared about the students' work, and his work in particular. In describing this event, Michael also said:

When we left, everyone gave [Gerry Talbot] a hug, and . . . . he told [the two other students] to take care of themselves. He was like, "You two take care of yourself. And you, you better take care of yourself" to me, and, well, it just seems like, I don't know, it just seems like he notices me more than the others or something like that. I don't really know what it is. (Michael, personal communication, February 3, 2011).

Being noticed more than others was powerful for Michael. To be recognized for his hard work—and for something that Michael could not quite put his finger on but that he knew had to do with him specifically—perpetuated Michael's own engagement in Small Acts past its official end date and culminating event. Although Michael did not explicitly take up and work on new civil rights issues, his care for Gerald Talbot's story—and Gerald Talbot, the person—evolved. This was in juxtaposition to recent behavioral missteps that resulted in Michael being suspended for several days.

Discussion
Michael's story is only one of 80 that occurred during this project. Admittedly, not all students engaged in the same way Michael did; some approached it as they would ordinary schoolwork: as tasks

organized by the teacher for the purpose of learning about the civil rights movement. Michael's experience is distinctive because of his concentrated effort on the production of his written narrative, the trajectory of his relationship with his interviewee, and the endurance of a certain kind of recognition across space and time. Moreover, this recognition was mutual: Michael and Gerry Talbot recognized each other through the substance of what Michael produced (i.e., his acknowledgment of his interviewee's life story by performing it in front of audiences and capturing it for historical record).

Michael's and other students' work enabled boundary permeability between children and elder members of the community and between the school as a whole and the community. There is a confluence here, at various levels, of the concept of boundary objects and Soder's (2001) notion of exchange as a necessary condition for democracy. What students produced, for example, in the form of the four-volume books, public performances, and in-person encounters served as the substance of negotiation and exchange. Specific moments of this exchange/boundary crossing occurred when Michael gave a near-final draft of his writing to his interviewee for critique; when Michael gave a short speech about his interviewee at the portrait unveiling; and in the in-between moments of intimate exchange between Michael and his interviewee. An analysis of these recognitive moments yielded four features of unalienated recognition and democratic exchange, which I discuss below.

First, recognition occurred in unpredictable ways. How recognition was manifested in students, though somewhat scripted (i.e., there was a predetermined goal of acknowledging community members), was unknown at the outset. For Michael, planned and unplanned recognitive moments allowed him to see the impact his contributions had on people that he held in great esteem. Had recognition been knowable, the possibility of authentic exchange might have been reduced to more typical forms of school-based alienated recognition, such as receiving an A on the project or getting praise from a teacher.

Akkerman and Bakker (2011) say that a boundary object "creates a possibility to look at oneself through the eyes of other worlds" (2011, p. 146). Along these lines, a second feature of unalienated recognition emerged from this case. For Michael, recognition was predicated on reciprocal exchange, in which the recognizer became recognized and vice versa. Through the aid of student work as boundary objects, meaning was bidirectionally negotiated and the recognition of one constituted the other's. In this sense, one person's recognition did not produce the other, but instead the two grew in relation to each other. The way that Michael was recognized by his interviewee—and how his interviewee was recognized by Michael—is similar to what Noddings (2005) calls "confirmation." She suggests that it is through confirmation that there can exist caring relations; the humanness within a person is confirmed by another—the one who cares, through caring acts, confirms and elevates the cared-for's humanness: "Confirmation lifts us toward our vision of a better self" (Noddings, 2005, p. 25).

Third, recognition was continuous. Opportunities for recognition were not isolated to a singular event or moment but

instead occurred across time and within and across participation in cultural practices. For Michael, though he started the project with a proclivity for history and an interest in lesser-known stories of the civil rights era, it was through his ongoing, ever-progressing relationship with his interviewee that he accessed the recognition for his work.

Fourth, recognition did not reside solely within individuals but instead was located within activity and across artifacts. In other words, it was a feature of participation in activity, not simply a result of participation. At King, school-wide cultural practices—developed over 23 years—fostered exchange and recognition; they were not simply characteristics of this one project on the civil rights movement. Michael no doubt experienced recognition, but it was because of the negotiation across artifacts, people, and time that recognition for his contributions could be produced.

The unalienated recognition Michael produced and experienced shaped his participation in Small Acts and his developing sense of self. Through this project, he became a young person who (a) contributed to historical knowledge and thus his work had tangible community-related use-value, and (b) had enduring personal connections to a respected member of the community, use value of the intangible sort. Here Miettinen's (2005) words come to life: "These achievements constitute the objectified demonstration of the capabilities of the individual to contribute to the vitality of the community" (p. 63). Although I make no specific claims that these moments have or will propel Michael toward a perfectly bright future, academically or otherwise, it is clear that the recognition and connections made a difference to him.

Implications

The four distinguishing features of unalienated recognition, as discussed above and in light of sociocultural views of schooling, have theoretical and practical implications. In this final section, I suggest ways in which Michael's case holds significance for how democratic practices in schools are conceived and implemented and what they mean for purposely designing learning experiences to foster unalienated recognition.

As noted earlier, schooling typically truncates meaningful exchange among people inside and outside of schools. In particular, children, through the production of work of little or no value, are alienated from relations across and within social worlds. By perpetuating a nationally institutionalized culture of testing and accountability, children's opportunity to "contribute to the vitality of the community" (Miettinen, 2005, p. 63) rarely occurs.

What would it take for student work to be boundary objects? Despite the appearance of exchange, some democratic practices in schools fall short of critical features exemplified in Michael's example. Many projects are aimed at nonproximal topics, are abstracted from day-to-day happenings outside of school, or occur as one-time endeavors, falling short of opportunities for meaningful democratic exchange. To go beyond what Lave and McDermott (2002) calls "cosmetic fixes for the systemic ills" (p. 39) of public schooling, institutionalized structures and cultural practices need to shift. At King, it is not just that one student and one classroom had a remarkable experience; it is that most students on most days work on meaningful projects and have been doing so for 23 years.

To shift pedagogical practices toward boundary-objects-by-design and unalienated recognition, curricular logic should incorporate the following: (a) direct connection to people in the local community who contribute to the continual improvement of nearby conditions; (b) topics and questions that endure over time and have the potential to keep students connected beyond the end of an academic unit; and (c) opportunities to share student work publicly—an audience of community members who have a stake in the artifacts produced matters. These practices can occur across subject areas and grades levels. The list of possible projects is endless and includes: water-quality testing, creating field guides to local natural areas, interviewing recent immigrants, and writing and performing historically accurate dramas.[4]

Despite the developmental potential of unalienated recognition, there are possible risks to recognitive exchanges as I have presented them. Bingham (2001, 2006) provides a critical look at recognition in schools, philosophically and practically, and emphasizes that recognitive moments are not inherently positive. Terming it the "struggle for recognition" (Bingham, 2001, p. 8) Bingham says that "human beings need *recognition* because they deserve *dignity*" (p. 9) and therefore strive to be recognized. He describes three alternate possibilities to positive recognition: (a) misrecognition, where a person or group is recognized under faulty premises or rests on misunderstandings; (b) malrecognition, where recognition either causes harm or someone is recognized for negative qualities; and (c) nonrecognition, where recognition does not occur or is a nonevent. Recognition in these cases would be fraught with negative consequences and thus would not be developmental. If recognition as I have described it is indeed a necessary feature of democratic schooling, then understanding the possible pitfalls are critical to boundary-objects-by-design.

Conclusion: "And Those Moments I Haven't Forgot"

There are two opposing conceptions of exchange in schools: one that is alienating and representative of Sidorkin's (2001) waste basket economy, and the other that is democratic and socially meaningful. The recognition exemplified in my study—unalienated recognition—merges democratic exchange with what children produce as shaping and constituting a public space. In this vein, it is apt that Michael, in remembering his work in Small Acts said, "And those moments I haven't forgot" (Michael, personal communication, October 22, 2010). For Michael, a seventh grader who struggled with school, to have unforgettable academic moments, steeped in his evolving friendship with Gerry Talbot, was profound. For children, these schooling moments more often come from making honor roll or excelling at extracurricular activities, if they come at all; but to be known by fellow students, their teachers, and by respected people in the community is an entirely different way of being recognized. When academic content is purposefully infused with social relationships and community practices, learning matters to students in substantially different ways than what more commonly occurs in a standards-based system. The type of projects discussed in this article can be an

antidote to the alienated recognition that is a byproduct of test scores and grades as the primary means for acknowledgement of students' academic labor.

In part, what I have presented points to a way of sustaining students' contributions to democratic practices beyond isolated school-based projects. When students' work itself constitutes a public space, the perspective of what it means to "do school" and what it means to be part of a community is dramatically altered. As Dewey said, "the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute" (Dewey, 1976, p. 230). For young people to share their work with, and have it be cared for by, people across social worlds is a vision of schooling that propels reform away from an audit culture and toward the cultural practices of democratic exchange and unalienated recognition.

Notes

1. The case I present here is part of a larger research study that encompassed my dissertation, *Stories Worth Telling: How One School Navigates Tensions Between Innovation and Standards*, and a joint research project with university colleagues examining sociocultural perspectives on motivation.

2. EL is a whole-school reform model currently implemented in over 160 schools across the United States. Originally called Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, EL started in 1993 after receiving a multimillion dollar grant from the New American Schools Development Corporation to pilot and develop their design in 10 schools. King was one of these schools.

3. Not his real name.

4. All are recent projects at King Middle School—see http://king.portlandschools.org. For additional examples, see Expeditionary Learning's Center for Student Work website: http://elschools.org/student-work.

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