

## Aspirational Standing: Recognition in the Transformative Classroom

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Article abstract

*Appeals to transformative education are so ubiquitous that if an educational advertisement claimed to only offer instruction, consumers might worry they were being shortchanged. However, the meaning of transformative education is often superficially understood, shifting between various conceptions, each bearing distinct ethical complications. The result is an educational concept that provides unreliable guidance to educators – that is, those charged with transforming the lives of students. This article contends that Douglas Yacek's recent book *The Transformative Classroom* offers a compelling and ethically defensible theory of transformative education-as-aspiration. However, Yacek's account does not adequately define the sociality of the transformative classroom and risks reducing a diverse group of students to a paradigm of individual transformation. I seek to strengthen Yacek's account by examining the kind of recognition that ought to occur between students who are diverse in terms of their stages of aspiration and aspirational projects. I call the property of this recognition "aspirational standing," and explain how acknowledging it can advance our understanding of an aspirational community in the classroom and at school.*

# Aspirational Standing: Recognition in the Transformative Classroom

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*Appeals to transformative education are so ubiquitous that if an educational advertisement claimed to only offer instruction, consumers might worry they were being shortchanged. However, the meaning of transformative education is often superficially understood, shifting between various conceptions, each bearing distinct ethical complications. The result is an educational concept that provides unreliable guidance to educators – that is, those charged with transforming the lives of students. This article contends that Douglas Yacek’s recent book *The Transformative Classroom* offers a compelling and ethically defensible theory of transformative education-as-aspiration. However, Yacek’s account does not adequately define the sociality of the transformative classroom and risks reducing a diverse group of students to a paradigm of individual transformation. I seek to strengthen Yacek’s account by examining the kind of recognition that ought to occur between students who are diverse in terms of their stages of aspiration and aspirational projects. I call the property of this recognition “aspirational standing,” and explain how acknowledging it can advance our understanding of an aspirational community in the classroom and at school.*

A fashionable way to say an educational program offers something more than mere knowledge and skills, high-status credentials, and favourable labour market prospects, is to call it *transformative*. Generally speaking, this means the program promises to significantly change students – as persons – and, through this change, impact the world in a momentous way. Although this vague, inspirational message may be all educational advertisements intend to convey, the halo surrounding talk of transformation raises questions about educational practice. If educators are indeed charged with the mission of transforming students’ commitments, identities, and fundamental values, how should this substantial change take place? Given the ethical and practical stakes of this endeavour, Douglas Yacek’s recent book *The Transformative Classroom* (2021) meets a critical need by consolidating and assessing various paradigms of transformation, offering readers a positive account of it, and providing suggestions for how this account can guide educational practice and shape a classroom community. According to Yacek, the best way to avoid the ethically problematic or “dark side” (p. 14) of transformative education, or theories of transformation which threaten to harm a student by subjecting their identities to disruption or disorientation without sufficiently exposing them to educational values, is to conceive of it through the phenomenon of aspiration. Transformative education grounded in a theory of aspiration motivates students to change by exposing them to educational values. Defined technically by philosopher Agnes Callard, aspiration means: “the cases in which the project of becoming someone is also the process of appreciating the values distinctive of becoming that kind of person” (2018, p. 8). Transformative educators, according to Yacek, ought to be primarily involved in exposing students to educational values and thereby jumpstarting and developing student aspiration – that is, a positive desire to *work* towards a better evaluative condition in regards to a disciplinary practice (e.g., becoming a person who values science) – and discovering through this labour of appreciation (rather than a fixation on their lack or deficiencies) the motivation to transform themselves.

While the first two sections of Yacek’s book use the “paradigm” of the aspiring individual (Yacek, 2021, p. 137), the third section aims to think about transformation in a classroom context. Yacek

argues that the classroom ought to be conceived as an “aspirational community” (p. 148), where educators are involved in “framing and facilitating student participation so that students come to see each other as co-aspirants and desire to foster each other’s aspirations” (p. 169). This article contends that Yacek’s conception of the aspirational community does not sufficiently move beyond the paradigm of the aspiring individual. Readers are presented with examples in which the whole class is swept up in the same inspiring story and guided by educators along the same aspirational path. To develop an understanding of the aspirational community, it is necessary to attend to the fact that recognition will occur between students who are diverse in terms of their aspirations. I say “develop” because Yacek’s book has resources to better define the sociality of the transformative classroom, but does not use them to provide readers with a more complex account of it. The result of this neglect is an account of transformative education that can mislead educators to believe that transformative education is an all-or-nothing affair, in which everyone in the class is either gripped by and aspiring towards the academic values in the same way or the class is failing and leaving students unchanged.

This article aims to develop Yacek’s project by defining the form of recognition that ought to occur between students in the transformative classroom. My argument is that a classroom is transformative when students respect each other in terms of their aspirations, or their various projects of committed self-transformation. I call the property of this recognition “aspirational standing,” a term which captures the praise, esteem, respect, and status students confer (or ought to confer) upon each other in terms of their commitments to value (or aspire toward) the subject being taught. When students are encouraged to care about how the course content is affecting the lives of their peers and, through this care, discern the higher standing of peers who are aspiring, then that classroom is transformative. The social space counts as transformative even if there is aspirational diversity – that is, even if the students are not in the same stage of aspiration or some students are aspiring towards values introduced in a different classroom. The transformative classroom should not be conceived as a diverse group reduced to an individual, nor as the net sum of individuals who are transforming, such that if a certain percentage of the class is aspiring then the class passes as transformative, but rather as the recognition of a social position constituted by aspiration. So, the class is transformative if the aspirants, in a given academic discipline, are held in esteem and elevated by their peers because of their efforts to transform themselves according to the values inherent in the subject being taught.

To make this argument, I begin by introducing Yacek’s positive account of transformation, which draws heavily from Callard’s *Aspiration*. I argue in this section that transformation as aspiration provides the least ethically problematic paradigm of transformation because it does not entertain a deficit view of students in which students must be transformed as a prior condition for appreciating the value being taught. To illustrate the advantages of Yacek’s theory of transformation, I examine the value of anti-racism and compare Yacek’s account with the paradigm of transformation undergirding Robin DiAngelo’s prominent approach to anti-racist education. After presenting and affirming Yacek’s contribution, I turn to my critique of his project; namely, that Yacek’s insufficient attention to diverse aspirants leads readers to a rather simplistic picture of *all* students (like one individual) moving together through the stages of aspiration along the same aspirational path. To not mislead educators by reducing the transformative classroom to an aspiring individual, I argue that a new concept is needed, which is aspirational standing. I unpack this concept by distinguishing it from three more common forms of recognition at school: the recognition of academic achievement, the recognition of academic effort, and the recognition of students’ common humanity. Noting an instructive relationship between recognizing common humanity and conferring aspirational standing, I argue that the conferral of aspirational standing develops from a classroom in which respect for students’ common humanity (i.e., regardless of their accomplishments) has been achieved. When educators see that respect for common humanity lies at the basis of aspirational standing, they will be better positioned to recognize and prepare for the aspirational community and more complex social spaces like an aspirational school.

## Transformation as Aspiration

Yacek claims in *Transformative Classroom* that aspiration is the right way to conceive of transformative education for two primary reasons. The first is that it avoids the ethical and existential harms that other theories (or “paradigms”) of transformation do not; the second is that it enhances student agency. In this section, I argue that aspiration is indeed the correct way to think about transformative education, but do so using slightly different terms. As I see it, aspiration better avoids the “dark side” of transformation for two reasons. First, it approaches students from an asset perspective (while the other paradigms risk approaching students from a deficit perspective), and second, it prioritizes bringing students into contact with value such that the act of transformation is integral to a positive project that the students take up, rather than being a prior step that is merely instrumental to one. To make this argument it will be important to elaborate on the meaning of aspiration.

Aspiration is the process by which a person (freely and purposefully) works to achieve a better valuational condition (Callard, 2018). Transformation occurs through aspiration because working towards truly appreciating something of value involves working to become a different and “better” (fuller, enriched) person. What is meant by “value” here involves a deep commitment to a project that is large in scale and not simply a trivial preference or passing liking for, say, a pop song or fashion trend.

There are innumerable examples of aspiration – from deciding to become an academic physicist to deciding to become a professional saxophonist, but perhaps the most powerful example is also the most common; namely, the aspiration to befriend another person – not to “network,” seek therapeutic support, or idly chatter, but to engage in a deeply meaningful, reciprocal, life-changing relationship. Consider a person in your life who fits the description of a true friend. When you first met your future friend, you did not (and could not) immediately see their unique value. You constructed their identity through your immediate attractions (or repulsions) and by projecting onto this person an assemblage of memories, types, and phenomenal concepts (e.g., “reminds me of Sam,” “introvert,” “a woman like *that*”). However, as you spent time with this friend, you began to see them as uniquely valuable and a desire was born for the friendship to grow, that is, for you to become a person who is more familiar with and appropriately appreciative of that person (who is *not really* like Sam). The aspiration to befriend this person likely involved initial episodes of inauthenticity, awkwardness, and second-guessing. And, as the relationship progressed, there were probably moments of annoyance and conflict as you more clearly saw this person’s flaws and foils. If these initial and later episodes were not overcome through effort, your friendship – constituted by a mature knowledge of and appreciation for your friend’s unique value – would not have been obtained.

Sticking with the example of friendship, aspiration, as Callard defines the term, focuses on the *initial* work of friendship – “the cases in which the project of becoming someone is also the process of appreciating the values distinctive of becoming that kind of person” (2018, p. 8). The value, in this case, is “friendship with  $x$ ” and the process is transformative because better understanding this value involves becoming a different person: a friend, in a nontrivial sense, of  $x$ . Callard zeros in on the phenomenon of aspiration as it relates to three domains of philosophical inquiry:

- 1) practical rationality (i.e., the kinds of reasons we have when we are initially aspiring to befriend  $x$ ; Callard calls these “proleptic reasons”),
- 2) moral psychology (i.e., the nature of the initial desire to befriend  $x$ ), and
- 3) responsibility (what it means to exercise agency to transform ourselves when we are aspiring to befriend  $x$ ).

Her inquiry provides readers with a fine-grained understanding of immature aspiration: aspiration in its initial stage.

Yacek develops Callard’s account of aspiration in two ways. First, he considers the full course of aspiration beyond its initial stage. Rather than being understood only in terms of the *difference* between the self we currently are and the self we aspire to be (e.g., the moments of awkwardness we may feel as we work to befriend  $x$ ), Yacek thinks aspiration should also be understood in terms of the persistent

*distance* between the transformed self and the unique value in question – for example, the fact that, despite our stable appreciation for  $x$ , we never fully arrive at friendship because we continue to cultivate the relationship and aspire to be a better friend. A more technical way of putting this is that Yacek holds that the desires appropriate to aspiration are *dialectical*, ever developing and unceasingly perfectible, while Callard focuses on the initial stage of transformation, in which aspirations appear to be a second-order desire (or the desire to have the desire to befriend  $x$ ). Yacek’s account is not opposed to Callard’s, but distinguishes itself by better attending to the mature stages of aspiration. A mature aspiration may not cross a major transformative threshold (e.g.,  $x$  becoming a radically different person), yet it continues to develop and change us subtly as the relationship to the value in question unfolds.<sup>1</sup>

Second, Yacek develops Callard’s theory by fleshing out its pedagogical implications in the classroom. Yacek makes a compelling case that if we are going to speak of a transformative education in formal educational settings (K–12 and college classrooms), we ought to do so in terms of aspiration. Put another way, his book helps us to see that the process of learning to value academic disciplines (the elegance of mathematics, the complexity of historical narratives, or spontaneity in musical innovation) involves a transformative “value-education” (Callard, 2018, p. 75). Transformative education, in other words, ought to be conceived as a positive project *like* the aspiration to discover the unique value of a person over the course of a life-changing friendship.

It is worth stressing that an education that develops aspiration is not simply a matter of philosophical theory or mere language – calling transformation *this* as opposed to *that*, with no practical difference. As scholars of teacher education fully realize, educators see and act according to their conceptual orientations; their concepts inform their percepts, actions, and decisions. The point is that entrenched theory guides practice and behaviour. A problematic educational theory is not simply an academic affair but will be liable to guide educators in the wrong way. In the case of transformative education, something that is “wrong” will be harmful to students’ identities, values, and fundamental commitments.

Yacek argues that popular conceptions of transformative education (which he consolidates and calls “paradigms”)<sup>2</sup> run such existential and ethical risks. They do so, as I interpret his argument, because they encourage educators to adopt a “deficit view” of students by focusing less on the positive project of students coming into contact with and learning to value  $x$  (and thereby being transformed) and more on the negative project of changing a student (correcting their deficits) as a prior condition for valuing  $x$ . The problem with other theories of transformation is that the “light” and “drive” come from the student’s insufficiencies – their problems, hindrances, and stagnate points. Until these deficits are removed, until a student’s self is transformed, he or she will not be in a position to truly value  $x$ . Yacek’s account, on the other hand, focuses on educators facilitating a relationship with a unique academic value (e.g., the value of thinking like a scientist). The student’s motivation to transform comes from, as it were, catching sight of this value. The defects in their valuation appear only as they are enlightened by this value; and the motivation to work towards a better appreciation is inspired by contact with the value, with *its* unique call, so to speak. Focusing on deficits in value commitments requires educators to make assumptions about the student’s identity and encourages the imposition of transformative negativity (distress, dissolution, or disruption) to put them in a better evaluative position.

To illustrate how Yacek’s account exposes the deficit perspective harboured by existing paradigms of transformative education, I will focus on the “conversion” paradigm as it is used in social justice education, specifically Robin DiAngelo’s anti-racist pedagogy. The conversion paradigm is defined

<sup>1</sup> Although the intention of this essay is not to focus on this difference, Yacek’s account seems more reliable. If in the case of aspiration the “most important beginnings are those that, in an aspirational sense, hang from the end” (Callard, p. 14, 2018) and the immature stages of aspiration are “parasitic” on the mature stages (p. 228), and the desires of the mature aspirant are dialectical, then Yacek’s work is necessary for a full understanding of aspiration.

<sup>2</sup> Yacek discusses three paradigms of transformation. Transformation as “conversion,” which he explains with reference to multicultural education and critical pedagogy, transformation as “emancipation” which he explains with reference to Jack Mezirow’s theory of transformation (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009), and transformation as “reconstruction,” which references Deweyan accounts of transformation put forth by Andrea English (2013).

by Yacek as: “an educational process in which students come to appreciate the power of a comprehensive new ideal and to radically reorient their lives according to its dictates” (2021, p. 21). Its pedagogical method involves “destabilizing previous modes of thinking and acting so that [students] can adopt the principles of the conversional goal” (p. 27). Along with its long history in religious traditions, the logic of conversion can be seen clearly in approaches to anti-racist education, in which the general value is “striving to be without racist attitudes oneself” and “being prepared to work against both racist attitudes in others and racial injustice in society more generally” (Blum, 1991, p. 2). As contemporary versions of anti-racist pedagogy run, students ought to be taught that American society, the society in which they have been reared, has a fundamental problem with racism that sorely compromises its professed devotion to liberty and equal opportunity. Students will *not* be able to appreciate the values of anti-racism until they see that the culture they swim in, as it were, has been and currently is steeped in White supremacy. Any misgivings or doubts about these realities, particularly when raised by White Americans, are not likely to be interpreted as reasonable concerns but rather treated as the (conscious or unconscious) reaction of a racist disposition. DiAngelo has famously called this reaction “White fragility,” meaning the ways White people become upset and defensive when they are discussing race and feel as though they are being accused of racism. White people weaponize their fragility, as DiAngelo explains, to avoid facing racism.

Given the pathologies and psychological stratagems of White Americans, the task of transformative anti-racist educators is to teach White students to suspend doubts and questions, and simply receive the truth. As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) explain: “rebuttals that function to block out, cut off, or negate explanations are counter to the goals of education, be it critical social justice or any other kind. We ask our readers to reflect on whether the goals of their questions are greater clarity or greater protection of their existing world view” (p. 130). There is some pedagogical tact in these lines, but concepts inform percepts, and it is not difficult to imagine doubts or questions raised by an agitated White student being perceived as anything but an expression of White fragility. The student, in other words, is liable to be interpreted from a deficit perspective – as unable to receive in good faith the value of anti-racism conveyed by the educator’s explanations and worldview. For these deficits to be corrected, the student must look past the complexity of their narrative (from a complex person to a “White person”) and suspend their agency – that is, their reactive attitudes and desire to offer a fuller account or alternative explanations. The value of anti-racism will not be appreciated by the student unless this prior transformation (or conversion) is accomplished.

Yacek (2021) rightly points out that this approach to transformative education suspends possibilities of dialogue and inquiry, and may lead to what he calls “transformative trauma” – a state of dissolution from frameworks of understanding “without a strong sense of having found a replacement” (p. 41). Unfortunately, the educational climate has been so heavily influenced by self-sealing arguments like DiAngelo’s that *any* questioning of her theory can lead to the impulsive conclusion that the questioner is intent on neglecting social justice. This would be a grave mistake, at least in Yacek’s case, because he is in no way denying the values of anti-racism (or social justice, more generally), but is trying to offer a *better* account of transformative education, one that will introduce students to values without discouraging dialogue or harming agency. Put another way, if a theory can be likened to a lens, what Yacek intends to offer readers is a *better* way of envisioning and perceiving transformation in the classroom.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> An example of an approach to anti-racist education that is closer to Yacek’s theory of aspiration can be found in Ali Michael’s work, which is geared towards achieving what bell hooks calls a “beloved community.” Notice, in these lines below, how Michael describes the value of maturely realizing that she is a White person in a racist American society:

Contrary to what I believed, feeling guilty for being white wasn’t the end goal. The first time I saw my students of color through my autonomous racial identity, I realized how truly transformational it can be to the teacher-student relationships. Suddenly, I could really see my students of color in all their wholeness – along with the racist subtext that shapes their lives – and my view was less clouded by my own guilt insecurities and ignorance. (Michael, 2015, p. 49)

The conversion paradigm runs the risk of transforming students as a prior condition for making contact with the value in question. Its “dark side” can have disastrous educational and political consequences. Indeed, there is currently a critical mass of White Americans who judge the value of anti-racism to be un-American – antithetical to liberty, equality, and upward mobility. The confused and regressive reactions of this group, however, would not be surprising if they had left an encounter with anti-racist educators with the dictate ringing in their ears that their identity is fundamentally flawed, such that transforming their identities is the only way of appreciating anti-racism. Perhaps dealing with this hypothetical group is a political project. Perhaps they need to be labelled as “them” and not “us” and forced into guilt-laden conversion or marginalized and kept in silence. Yet if we are to speak of transformative education, and approach the problem as educators, then, regardless of the values being introduced, we ought to worry about pedagogical approaches that reduce complexity and impair student agency. Put positively, in the vein of Yacek’s account, there is good reason to conceive of the value of anti-racism in terms of aspiration and reconsider how it might be introduced to all students – including White American students living in isolated, rural communities – like a friend.

To summarize the point, if Yacek’s account of transformation involves something like the educator facilitating friendship with educational values, the difference in focus and orientation between his account and rival accounts can be seen by comparing the following lines: “This is a wonderful person. Befriending her will inspire you. Let me find a way to introduce you!” versus, “You have problems and need to change, otherwise you will not be in a position to befriend x. Let me change you.”

In the first lines, there is greater confidence in the person’s agency and the transformative power of the friend’s value. The speaker plays an essential but more minimal role as a facilitator. In the second lines, the person’s agency is discounted; the unique value is too different and distant to inspire change on its own; the speaker’s judgement and power are accentuated. The latter lines provide a snapshot of what Yacek calls the “dark side” of transformative education, for if the educator’s transformative labour (literally work on the student’s self) misfires or is partially completed, a person could be changed – or have their disposition disrupted – without encountering *anything* of value – for example, without having met the friend. So, this is not simply a *dark* side of transformation (i.e., the potential of harming students by discounting or reducing their agency), but also a vacuous and nihilistic side. There is a greater potential for educators, despite their intentions, to leave students with *nothing* of value and in a *worse* evaluative position. Yacek’s thoughtful diagnosis of the paradigms of transformation and account of aspiration offer a resource for the field of anti-racist education, along with other academic fields students encounter at school.

### The Problem with Yacek’s Account of the Transformative Classroom

If the above section affirms the merits of Yacek’s account of transformative education, and the article’s overall aim is to develop it, this section focuses on insufficiencies in his argument. The problem is twofold: First, Yacek’s book helps educators to understand that students can be at different stages of aspiration. For example, in a given classroom we might find students whose capacity to aspire is blocked by apathy; students who pretend to aspire (but only after higher grades or more points); students who

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In Michael’s account, the value of knowing and being in relationship with students of colour is the end to be achieved, not gazing into the mirror of her own deficits or castigating the bad White people around her. Notice, as well, how in Michael’s account the aspiration to value anti-racism – and work against racial injustice – does not stand alone but is necessarily related to the values of belonging to an interracial community and appreciating individuality (cf. Blum, 1991). The difficult work Michael has undergone – the process of continued self-examination and activism – is not avoided, but is motivated by an ongoing aspiration to participate in a “beloved community.” Put into conversation with Michael’s work, Yacek’s theory of aspiration does not avoid the value of anti-racism but is motivated by contact with a value that makes demands on a student’s agency through its inspiration. The transformation that occurs – even if partial – does not threaten to harm student agency because it functions as an invitation.

are generally open to aspiring, but not committed to a particular project; students who are in the early stages of aspiration; and, ideally, an educator who is in the later or mature stage of aspiration, continually refining their appreciation of the subject they teach. Yet he does not ask how students in different stages of aspiration ought to regard each other, a question which will predictably arise if educators strive to create an aspirational classroom constituted by non-identical students. Second, Yacek helps readers to understand that, while there are diverse aspirational projects, an individual must autonomously commit to a given project (or a “small subset of passionate commitments” [2021, p. 128]) for an aspiration to be transformative. Aspiration involves a specific commitment, not a general exploration of values. However, he neglects to ask how students with diverse commitments, occupying schools that introduce a variety of values, ought to relate to each other in a given classroom – for example, how an aspirant in scientific thinking ought to relate to an aspiring musician in a history classroom that would rightfully pass as transformative. Yacek’s insufficient attention to recognition in a *diverse* aspirational community, a social space in which all students are not in the same stage or on the same path of aspiration, risks leaving educators with an account of individual transformation in social dress.

To illustrate these concerns, consider the following two English literature classrooms, wherein two educators are using literature to introduce a classroom of White students (from a rural community) to the value of anti-racism. Recall that we defined the value of anti-racist pedagogy as: “striving to be without racist attitudes oneself” and “being prepared to work against both racist attitudes in others and racial injustice in society more generally” (Blum, 1991, p. 2). Let us imagine that in the first English literature classroom an inclusive and engaged ethos prevails. There is convivial energy and evidence that a community has been formed despite various levels of appreciation for the values in question, though only two students, as it turns out, have opted to work towards a mature appreciation of anti-racism. In the second classroom, however, all but two students are barely engaged – present in the classroom only by compulsion or to score points. In this class, eyes are furtive, and a dead, lifeless silence haunts “discussions,” save for the remarks of two engaged students, who catch sight of the values of anti-racism and with the borderline, private assistance of their teacher, aspire towards a mature appreciation of them.

I trust that readers will find both examples plausible and judge the first classroom to be more desirable than the second. However, readers may be hard-pressed to describe why the first classroom counts as *transformative* when only a small minority of students – in fact, the same as the second classroom – are aspiring towards a mature appreciation of anti-racism. Clearly, the difference between the classrooms does not involve the number of students aspiring, but the quality of the social connection between diverse aspirants. In the first classroom, there is group formation, spontaneous energy, and course-related conviviality, while in the second a climate of social disconnection threatens to undermine exposure to the values being introduced. In typical assessments of classroom culture, we might chalk this up to curricular design, classroom management skills, or the educator’s charisma. Typical assessments neglect the presence of educational values in the classroom and their “work” (so to speak) in exciting aspirations and deepening the significance of what occurs in this space.

Proceeding atypically, and using terms introduced in the previous section, let us assume that in the first classroom a group has been formed and is oriented around varying degrees of contact with the value of anti-racism, while in the second the majority of students are disconnected from this value and (what is worse) likely feeling resentful towards the students who are aspiring to better appreciate it.

Applied to this case, Yacek’s account is that it does not sufficiently explain why the first classroom is transformative when only two students are aspiring toward appreciation and the majority are not. Readers may be unsure why, in terms of aspiration, the first classroom is preferable to the second, as the net sum of individuals working towards a mature appreciation of the value in question is the same. Part 3 of Yacek’s book, perhaps because of its reliance on Callard’s work, leads readers to believe that all students ought to be at the same place on the same aspirational path, as if the class *were* an individual. The teacher plans a curriculum that excites an “epiphany” or vision of everything that is good regarding the subject being taught. The epiphany gives way to a narrative that draws all students into an appreciation of the value in question and allows them to see a value they do not quite understand. Through the process, the educator cares for the students’ higher selves, and eventually (with the educator’s help) the students participate in an aspirational community and strive against, yet cheer for one another. Although



this is a caricature of part 3 of Yacek's book, it is recognizable because the group is presented as an individual. Yet all students are not at the same stage of aspiration or on the same path of aspiration. If this is not acknowledged, the transformative educator is liable to neglect what the course content and lessons *actually* mean to particular students, and students who are not aspiring according to the plan (for one reason or another) will risk being seen from a deficit point of view. This pedagogy could amount to a strange, rather spiritual sorting mechanism in which the group (as a whole) is sacrificed for the aspirants. We can imagine that *this* is why students in the second classroom will not participate in the classroom's "aspirational community" – because it feels forced, inattentive to their needs, and ethically problematic, like the conversion paradigm critiqued above.

Yacek's account of the aspirational community can be spared this critique when it is acknowledged that aspirational diversity is an uncontroversial fact in the classroom: All students are not (and should not be expected to be) at the same stage of aspiration or on the same path of aspiration. Defining the sociality of the aspirational community and understanding the recognition that occurs therein requires an acknowledgment of this fact.

While Yacek's book does not explicitly help educators to understand how students in diverse stages of aspiration ought to relate, it does help them to understand different stages of aspiration. Working with the terms he provides, we can name and organize the stages as follows. At subzero, furthest from a mature aspiration, there are persons whose capacity to aspire has been blocked by psychological barriers that "undermine the awakening and facilitation of aspiration" (Yacek, 2021, p. 111). Yacek provides an especially illuminating catalogue of such barriers, grouping them into two main categories: psychological barriers that block the reception of value (like apathy, which treats the world with indifference), and psychological barriers that mimic aspiration (such as a rabid ambition which appears to aspire after an unknown value (e.g., social justice in their community) but is really seeking a known value (e.g., being ranked first, or having more points than everyone else). Those whose capacity to aspire is psychologically blocked pose a special problem for transformative educators, and, we might add, clinical psychologists.<sup>4</sup> Those who imitate aspiration should pose a problem for educators who truly appreciate the value of the academic discipline they are teaching, but imitators of aspiration typically reap the rewards of their ambition and are celebrated for their academic achievement regardless of whether or not they care. We might call persons in this group *damaged aspirants*, *anti-aspirants*, and *faux aspirants*.

Next, there are what Yacek calls "pre-aspirants," that is, persons who are not aspiring towards a given value yet are capable of aspiring towards value because they are able to 1) recognize when they have encountered a new or unknown value inherent in social practice, and 2) imagine what it would be like for them to engage with this value and live according to its demands. Pre-aspirants are open to value. As Yacek (2021) writes: "Pre-aspirants know that there is more to see and feel and love in the world than what currently preoccupies them" (p. 112). Although pre-aspirants can acknowledge and perhaps anticipate different and larger frames of reference, their openness lacks the direction and purpose afforded by a particular, concrete project.<sup>5</sup>

Next, aspirants can be classed as "immature" and "mature." Immature aspirants are those who are working towards a transformative evaluative condition; they are sometimes painfully aware of and preoccupied with the *difference* between their appreciation of the value and the appropriate appreciation

<sup>4</sup> Yacek could have perhaps said more about how early childhood trauma can be a cause of blocked aspiration, and that breaking through the barriers is not simply a task for educators. Addressing this problem is not necessary for our purposes, but worth flagging.

<sup>5</sup> As an aside, the term "pre-aspirant" is ambiguous, as Yacek uses it, because it is unclear if we are talking about pre-aspirants in value  $x$  or pre-aspirants in general. For example, in the first case, we may find a person who has aspired toward a mature appreciation of landscape painting, but not towards academic administration. This person might be classed as a pre-aspirant in academic administration (i.e., open to a foreign value), but not as a pre-aspirant in all respects. Alternatively, we can imagine a person (e.g., a 10 year old) who has never aspired towards a mature aspiration of anything and is therefore a pre-aspirant across the board. The first person, presumably, would be in a better position to aspire towards a new value than the second person, yet they could both be classified as pre-aspirants. To recognize the distinction, I will refer to the first person as a "new aspirant" and the second person as a "pre-aspirant."

– that is, the level of appreciation held by the higher self they are striving to become. Immature aspirants are labouring to cross a “transformative threshold.” Mature aspirants have crossed this threshold and fully realize that they are (for example) lovers of science but humbly acknowledge the complexity of the practice they are engaged in and do not assume that they fully possess its value. We might say their continued engagement is marked by less extreme peaks and troughs, and more subtle moments of renewal and gift-like surprise, along with periods of staleness and undue fixation on the “baggage” (which likely accompanies any effort to sustain an aspiration in a bureaucratic society). Mature aspirants continue to cultivate an appreciation of a given value dialogically – through a kind of dialogue with it. The meaning of this, once again, is clear in the case of a longstanding friendship, one which is not constantly doubted but ever cultivated.

By way of summary, the stages of aspiration can be organized along the following spectrum:  
damaged aspirants/anti-aspirants/faux aspirants → pre-aspirants/new aspirants → immature aspirants → mature aspirants

If we assume that a classroom contains students who fall along this spectrum, the question becomes, how, in terms of aspiration, should we understand the recognition occurring between them?

Yacek’s response to this question is that students should be guided by their educators to form what he calls an aspirational community, where, once again, educators “[frame] and [facilitate] student participation so that students come to see each other as co-aspirants and desire to foster each other’s aspirations” (Yacek, 2021, p. 169). Such labours would be challenging but rather straightforward if the class was composed of identical students. However, if students are at different stages of aspiration and are not yet co-aspirants, Yacek’s description of an aspirational community could give rise to mistaken perceptions and a lack of prudence. For example, picture the teacher of the dispirited second classroom (mentioned above) *seeing* a community of aspirants and prompting dispirited students to sing “We Shall Overcome” at the start of each class. The scene is darkly comical because the crowd is clearly not gripped by the value in question despite the educator’s managerial efforts and “spray-on charisma” (Rieff, 2007, ch. 1). The maxim “fake it till you make it” breaks down, in these cases, and efforts to form an aspirational community become the butt of a joke. There is not a transformative classroom culture; the educator’s lofty ambitions are met with a combination of pretense, exasperation, and aversion by all but two students.

The same problem might arise in a different context in which the students in the group are pre-aspirants towards a given value – for example, anti-racism – but immature aspirants towards another value – for example, scientific thinking. In short, they are into “science,” but not really into “anti-racism,” Encouraging an aspirational community around the value of anti-racism, in this case, may lack prudence for neglecting the fact that aspiration requires resolving to take on a particular evaluative project, and persons should not be encouraged to aspire towards everything (and nothing) at once.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, let us imagine that students in the second classroom are aspiring elsewhere, such as with the value of scientific thinking. This does not mean that the group of budding scientists should not be exposed to the value of anti-racism, but that it may be unclear to them how their exposure (and pre-aspirational state) *relates* to an aspirational community of persons passionately seeking a mature appreciation of the value of anti-racism. Not being transformed by the values of anti-racism, given the critical importance of these values, sounds terrible but may be how things will be and it would be imprudent for an educator to ignore individual students in the class. So, for different reasons, we can imagine a group of budding scientists droning “We Shall Overcome.” The teacher, in this case, will have failed to fully appreciate that their immature aspiration is being pursued in a *different* domain. Again, if this possibility does not come into view, transformative educators, guided by Yacek’s book, might believe

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<sup>6</sup> Yacek raises this point against the claim that we should aspire towards a general aspiration like that of being educated. He writes “In my view, being an educated person requires not only that we come to value a range of worthwhile activities, but that we also pursue a small subset of passionate commitments in which we aspire to embrace the value we see in them” (Yacek, 2021, p. 128).

that inspiring students to develop aspirations is an all-or-nothing affair – for example, to either aspire towards the value of anti-racism (and to do everything in their educational power to overcome blocked or fake aspirations) or to utterly fail and, say, perpetuate the accursed legacy of White American racism. Such dichotomous thinking resembles the conversion paradigm which imprudently discounts other aspirational pursuits and values, and strives for (total) conversion instead of considering individual perspectives and the quality of relationships between students. So, we might ask, how can the transformative classroom and an “aspirational community” be identified when students are at diverse stages of aspiration *and* not everyone will join an aspirational community oriented by the values being introduced?

### Aspirational Standing

The aspirational community will not be sufficiently appreciated as a social space constituted by diverse students if we do not understand how immature aspirants, perhaps only a select few students in a given classroom, ought to be recognized. The property of this recognition is an esteem, respect, or dignity bestowed upon students in terms of their aspirations; in other words, projects of committed self-transformation. Because all students are not (and perhaps will never be) immature aspirants in a given subject, the esteem has a positional aspect and is bestowed unequally. Immature aspirants are elevated; their esteem comes in the form of what I have called “aspirational standing.” That aspirants should be accorded standing is not a matter of etiquette or cultural preference, but a position due to them given the values inherent in the subject being taught. The sociality of the transformative classroom can be better defined by understanding the activity of recognizing and praising aspiration in the classroom. Aspirational standing not only captures the sociality of the transformative classroom but can be used as a conceptual tool for determining whether or not a classroom is transformative according to Yacek’s theory.<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing and bestowing aspirational standing based upon the values inherent in the subject being taught is positive, constructive, and educationally relevant. However, it is not the only form of positive recognition that occurs in schools. Its meaning and place in the classroom can be fleshed out by contrasting it with three familiar forms of recognition: students recognizing their peers’ academic achievement, academic effort, and shared humanity (or basic equality). Although there are many forms of recognition at school, and undoubtedly struggles for recognition (Honneth, 1996), these three forms of recognition have been selected because of they are familiar and educationally relevant. Indeed, something would be amiss if one of these forms of recognition were absent. So, the recognition of aspiration will be developed by comparing it with, more or less, common practice at school.

To start, the most familiar form of positive recognition encountered in the classroom (and ostensibly related to the subject being taught) is the recognition of academic achievement. For instance, in most American high schools the valedictorian is honoured at graduation, a student’s class rank is written on quarterly report cards, and, in some cases, pictures of students with the highest GPA greet visitors at the entrance. Assuming the absence of cheating and unreliable assessments, the recognition of academic achievement celebrates students who best learn and demonstrate their knowledge across a range of disciplines. So, the status achieved is a result of intellectual capacity and effort. More controversially, it is also a product of what might be called “ambitious conformity”: ambitious because these students know what they want in advance of the subject being taught, and conformity because they must abide by various standards of achievement to get the most points overall. Indeed, if a student is in

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that aspirational standing is a concept that can be used to make both descriptive and normative claims. In the first classroom, mentioned above, we might describe how the students are respecting the two aspirants, say by showing them deference, listening more attentively when they speak, or praising them for their commitments. On the other hand, in the second classroom, we might say that the students *should* positively recognize the aspirants; that is, that the educator should do something differently so that their aspirations are praised by their peers rather than ignored or treated with indifference.

a heated competition to move from the class rank of 11 to 9, they will likely lose sleep and make sure they know the “rules of the game” (whether the subject is gym or math) to ensure that they get the highest number of points. They should not be praised for their aspirations, at least according to Yacek’s definition, because they do not (and cannot) value all subjects equally and are not being transformed. They are (presumably) only seeking what they sought before the class began: a superior grade and position with respect to their peers.

Aspirational standing and academic achievement are similar in that they are both forms of praise or esteem that are unequally bestowed and thus have a positional aspect. Granting these similarities, the contrast between aspiration and academic achievement is stark. Because a person pursuing an immature aspiration depends on *committing* to a specific evaluative project – for example, working to better appreciate musicianship – the typical recognition of academic achievement, one based upon the highest grades in all subjects, almost categorically discourages aspiration and reinforces a notion that learning should privilege acquisition. This is not to say that aspirational standing and academic achievement are incompatible, just that the more familiar focus on academic achievement would make it difficult to conceive of a school that has pictures of students who deserve the most praise in terms of their aspirations. Given the prevalence of praising academic achievement, praise for aspiration would likely be interpreted as praise for exceptional achievement in a given discipline (regardless of overall GPA) or something congratulatory but meritocratically fluffy, like the celebration of academic effort.

Comparing the recognition of academic effort with the recognition of aspiration reveals that they bear the following similarity: namely, they both celebrate a *process* over a result. The student who is staying up late to get the highest grade in a geometry class – or simply to pass it – is not praised for their achievement but for their efforts. Similarly, a student who is staying up late because they want to better appreciate mathematics, and become a mathematician, has also not arrived and is, as described above, an “immature aspirant.” While both focus on the process, the difference between recognizing effort and recognizing aspiration is that the focus is not on the general force of will or “grit” exerted but on a more specific struggle to appreciate. The immature aspirant, specifically, struggles with doubt and feels like they are pretending or “play-acting” (Callard, 2018, p. 5) as they work to cross a transformative threshold. The goal is not simply an obstacle to overcome but the appreciation for a value that implicates the student’s identity – for example, to *really* be an artist and love art, not simply, for example, to “get the nose right because getting the nose right in a self-portrait is ‘really hard’ and an important part of ‘finishing the job.’” Sticking with the art example, a peer who is praising academic effort might say: “Hector is working so hard on that nose! He is so focused on *everything* he does”; while a peer praising aspiration might say: “Hector is changing; he’s really serious about art and sees it differently than we do. It’s kind of amazing. I think he wants to be an artist.”

Finally, aspirational standing is different from students recognizing each other’s common humanity because the former is not given and the latter is. The recognition of aspiration involves distinction; the recognition of common humanity involves equality (Waldron, 2017). This noted, there is an instructive parallel between recognizing a student’s humanity and recognizing their aspiration. Both require an interpretation of another person’s personal autonomy or effort to understand how they are assigning meaning and significance to their lives; that is, how they are telling and creating the story of their life.

The capacity which founds “common humanity,” as I am using this term, draws heavily on Bernard Williams’s articulation of the “human point of view” in his famous essay “The Idea of Equality” (Williams, 2005, p. 103). The human point of view means not simply considering another’s achievement, or the results of their efforts, or indications that they are exerting effort, but what their actions *mean* for them: what it is like for a person “to live that life and do those actions in that character” (p. 103). The example Williams uses to flesh out what he means by the human point of view is particularly illuminating for our purposes, and I will quote it at length:

from a technological point of view, a man who has spent his life in trying to make a certain machine which could not possibly work is merely a failed inventor, and in compiling a catalogue of those whose efforts have contributed to the sum of technical achievement, one must “write

him off”: the fact that he devoted himself to this useless task with constant effort, and so on is merely irrelevant. But from the human point of view, it is clearly not irrelevant: we are concerned with him, not merely as a “failed inventor,” but as a man who wanted to be a successful inventor. (Williams, 2005)

Adopting the human point of view for the failed inventor means to accord him a kind of respect regardless of what his work merits. This point of view, as Williams rightly argues, is owed to all humans because of their common humanity, and the respect we have for humans ought to affect how we appraise their actions.<sup>8</sup> For instance, if the inventor were working on a bomb to destroy humanity, it would be an obviously horrible pursuit; however, it would not mean we should regard him as an animal or monster in our deliberations about him, for we can adopt an interpretive stance in which we seek to understand what his work (nefarious as it may be) means to him. Similarly, if the failed inventor were creating a machine to cure cancer, we would not reduce his identity to a failed “do-gooder,” but adopting the human point of view, we would strive to understand what he makes of his end goal.

Assessing the goodness or baseness of a person’s end matters when conferring aspirational standing. The inventor striving to blow up the world is *not* an aspirant, because his end lacks value (Callard, 2018, p. 241). So, there is a clear difference between conferring aspirational standing (which grants moral distinction) and adopting the human point of view (which affirms moral equality). Yet, and here is the instructive parallel, one *cannot* accord aspirational standing to another person without adopting the human point of view. A student must inquire about their peer: “Why are they making efforts? Are they ambitiously seeking points? Are they simply exerting effort to ‘get the job done’? Or are they striving to better appreciate the value(s) inherent in what is being taught and transforming themselves?” A judgement cannot be made without *first* exploring (and having reason to explore) what their peer’s endeavours, in the classroom, mean to them. Indeed, establishing a classroom culture in which students are encouraged to adopt the human point of view, and explore their (generally) shared human capacity to make sense of their lives and assign it significance, is the first step in creating an aspirational community in which aspirational standing is conferred between students who are at diverse stages of aspiration and aspiring along different paths. Regardless of how enchanting the educator or educational narrative may be, without the cultivation of the human point of view, there will be – by necessity – no opportunity for students “see each other as co-aspirants and desire to foster each other’s aspirations” (Callard, 2018, p. 169).

The aspirational community should be understood as a social space in which students are encouraged to understand how the classroom and curriculum affect their peers’ lives and what it means to them. Students in this community are encouraged to notice differences in presence and motivation, that one peer is engaged but for the wrong reasons, and that another is open to engagement but still not quite sure why the subject being taught is of any value to them. This is fine. Yet the climate of honesty and openness, as such, does not merit distinction. Perhaps in the early stages, a class should be praised for being open to each other, but this is not the goal of the aspirational community. At the end of the course, praise is due to the students who are aspiring to appreciate the value being taught, who are committed to “getting it” and becoming different and better people in the process. Even if this only consists of two students, the class is transformative because within the general openness to understanding what the content means to their peer’s lives – within a space of shared humanity – there is the presence of a height, a distant value, something beyond the class’s present condition, such that the students aspiring to move closer to it merit distinction. If this appreciation for an aspiring peer has been achieved, as I see it, the class, as a whole, has crossed a transformative threshold and counts as an “aspirational community” because it is encouraging aspirants in the subject being taught.

In an aspirational community, as I understand it, what is commendable is an aspiring peer. To judge that this peer is aspiring assumes that students realize that this peer’s life and “take” on their life matters to their peers, and thus how they are affected by the content of the course matters. Moreover, it requires understanding that this person’s efforts are directed towards a distinct and distant value, not

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<sup>8</sup> Compare to Darwall (1997, 2009).

simply what was known in advance or a more preferable position (e.g., having more points or academic achievement than the person sitting next to them). This means that to know that this peer is aspiring means that the students have some conception of the value in question. Perhaps watching this student aspire will inspire aspiration, as the value becomes clearer through recognition of their peer's commitment; perhaps it will only remain an appreciation for the peer who is aspiring, which is perhaps more like an appreciation for aspiration as such.

To recapitulate the argument, let us return to the example of the two English literature classrooms and the values of anti-racism. Here is how aspirational standing operates. The English literature teacher in the first classroom acknowledges that students are persons with complex stories. She uses literature to explore this complexity in the lives of others and expose them to the values of anti-racism. The course is designed to value individual perspectives and voices, so discussion is the preferred mode of instruction. While this is a classroom of White students – and American society does indeed have a troubling history of racism that seeps into the present – students are not approached from a deficit perspective. They do not need to be corrected or assimilated into the right worldview *before* they can adopt the perspectives of others and appreciate the values of anti-racism. Instead, the message conveyed by the educator is that their knowledge, experience, and questions are integral to the inquiry, and voicing them will help the classroom progress in appreciation of values that are often misinterpreted and can be difficult to appreciate beyond platitudes. Nevertheless, the educator spurs students to reconsider what is given or known about anti-racism by posing problems and examining questions raised by literary perspectives, and allows students time to process them and work through their assumptions. Two students, in this case, catch sight of the values of anti-racism – and how different and distant it is from the selves they currently inhabit. They are gripped by these values and begin to engage in the difficult transformative work it demands of White Americans. The other students know that the educator respects them (and is competent in designing lessons, progressing their understanding, and so on). In this climate of trust and respect, when the educator praises these students, their peers are invited to follow suit and accord these students aspirational standing. Although this act is not the same as transforming their lives according to the values in question, they welcome and appreciate the change in their peers because they appreciate the person who is taking it on and better understand what they are *really* doing.

This peer-to-peer recognition and conferral of standing, as I see it, are the defining characteristics of sociality in a transformative classroom in which the group is not taken to be an individual. The general educational value of this classroom is that it is a social space that encourages students to understand each other in terms of the meanings they assign to their lives, and, from this interpretive space, praise peers who aspire toward the higher values being introduced in the classroom. In such a classroom, the fact that student *x* is aspiring toward the value of anti-racism in English literature and student *y* is aspiring towards the value of scientific thinking in chemistry are not unrelated pursuits. If both classrooms are transformational, in the sense I have described, and students *x* and *y* are accorded aspirational standing therein, then we can see that this is not simply a matter of *x* and *y* adopting the human point of view, according each other standing for their respective endeavours, and understanding the distinct values motivating these endeavours through their relationship, but rather a space in which their peers are doing so (or are encouraged to do so) as well. Despite students being at different stages, despite the diverse values students encounter at school, and despite the fact that only a minority of students may strive to appreciate the values of a given classroom in a transformative way, the conferral of aspirational standing compounds opportunities for transformation at school. It does so by creating a culture in which diverse aspirations are akin to each other and students come to see aspirants as friends.

## Conclusion

If aspiration is the right way to think about the transformative classroom, as I believe it is, the intention of this article has been to provide a clearer understanding of what this means when the group is not reduced to an individual and students are diverse in terms of their aspiration. My argument has been that aspirational standing develops and defines the sociality of the aspirational community by accounting for

the meaning of transformation when aspirants are in the minority. Rather than lowering the ambitions of the transformative classroom, a classroom marked by aspirational standing allows us to envision a larger and more complex social space in which a variety of values are introduced to students and they are encouraged to “foster each other’s aspirations.” This might be called an “aspirational school,” which would be a space in which opportunities for transformation are multiplied as students engage in the positive project of relating to one another in terms of the meaning of their endeavours *and* aspirations. One tremendous contribution of Yacek’s *Transformative Classroom* (and Callard’s *Aspiration*) is to provide us with the conceptual materials to envision an aspirational school. This interpretive labour does not stop at identifying instances of aspiration. It continually enriches understanding by prompting educators – and school administrators – to understand how students are being affected by the curriculum and the underlying educational values they encounter at school. The question is not simply: Is this school transformative? But rather: Are students changing because they are making contact with educational values and aspiring to better appreciate them? Affirming this question and the care and attention it requires, the contribution of this article is to develop it by thinking through recognition in a diverse aspirational community. The question it raises is: Are peers according and accorded aspirational standing at school? Put another way, do students positively regard each other and obtain a unique and educationally relevant form of status in terms of their committed projects of self-transformation? This is not a familiar question, given the predictable design and forms of recognition encouraged at school, but informed by Callard’s and Yacek’s recent work, educators and administrators are positioned to catch sight of its distant value, and find the motivation to rethink classrooms and schools so that aspirational standing comes into focus and gains prominence.

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