

EDFN 747: Curriculum – Theory into Practice

Course Synthesis Paper – Behind the Hidden Curriculum

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### Introduction

Curriculum is defined by people in many different ways. Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines curriculum as "the courses that are taught by a school, college, etc" (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Wesley Null (2011) defines curriculum as follows: "Curriculum is about what should be taught...it combines thought, action, and purpose" (pg. 1). John C. Daresh (2007) wrote that curriculum can be understood to be "what schools and individual teachers choose to do in their encounters with children" (p.272).

No matter the exact definition we choose to use, curriculum typically refers to the knowledge and skills students are expected to learn, which includes the learning standards or learning objectives they are expected to meet; the units and lessons that teachers teach; the assignments and projects given to students; the books, materials, videos, presentations, and readings used in a course; and the tests, assessments, and other methods used to evaluate student learning (Experience and Education, 2014). An individual teacher's curriculum would be the specific learning standards, lessons, assignments, and materials used to organize and teach a particular course. In many cases, teachers develop their own curricula, often refining and improving them over years. In some cases, schools purchase comprehensive, multi-grade curriculum packages – often in a particular subject area, such as mathematics – that teachers are required to use or follow (The Great Schools Partnership, 2013).

In general, curriculum takes many different forms in schools, too many for me to comprehensively discuss in this paper. However, there is a part of many curriculums that goes unnoticed or undocumented. A part of the curriculum that, while often silent, arguably has a bigger impact on a child than what is said and done in the classroom, and in schools. What I am referring to is called the "hidden curriculum." Hidden curriculum refers to the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives that students learn in school.

While the “formal” curriculum consists of the courses, lessons, and learning activities students participate in, as well as the knowledge and skills educators intentionally teach to students, the hidden curriculum consists of the unspoken academic, cultural, and social messages that are communicated to students while they are in school (The Great Schools Partnership, 2013).

The Great Schools Partnership (2013) describe the significance of a hidden curriculum and its effect on students and school districts when they write:

The hidden-curriculum concept is based on the recognition that students recognize and absorb lessons in school that may or may not be part of the formal course of study—for example, how they should interact with peers, teachers, and other adults; how they should perceive different races, groups, or classes of people; or what ideas and behaviors are considered acceptable or unacceptable. The hidden curriculum is described as “hidden” because it is usually unacknowledged or unexamined by students, educators, and the wider community. And because the values and lessons reinforced by the hidden curriculum are often the accepted status quo, it may be assumed that these “hidden” practices and messages don’t need to change—even if they are contributing to undesirable behaviors and results, whether it’s bullying, conflicts, or low graduation and college-enrollment rates, for example. (para. 2)

In this synthesis, I will attempt to clearly define what aspects of a hidden curriculum are present in schools all across the country, and what effect they are having on our students in those schools. That said, a hidden curriculum is, by nature, “hidden,” which means that many of its lessons and messages are difficult to perceive or acknowledge for any number of reasons. Many of the topics I present in my paper may not be blatantly obvious, and in many cases, a teacher or school may not even realize that the problems exist. It is only through careful examination and analysis that the “hidden curriculum” can be exposed.

### Analysis

Australian educator, administrator, and author Hedley Beare once wrote “The intuitive, the expressive, the un-measurable, the intensely personal have never found a satisfactory place in the curriculum, in assessment, in the public’s esteem” (Experience and Education, 2014). This quote by Beare touches on a couple of the major aspects of the hidden curriculum in schools – the un-measurable and the intensely personal. The hidden curriculum can reinforce the lessons of the formal curriculum, or it can contradict the formal curriculum, revealing hypocrisy or inconsistencies between a school’s stated mission, values, and convictions and what students actually experience and learn while they are in school. Michael Apple (2004) describes hidden curriculum as those attitudes, values, and beliefs that conveyed to students as part of the overall school culture but are not explicitly stated in the curriculum document (pg. 15).

Hidden curriculum can also be looked at as those things that are not taught as opposed to those things that are – sometimes referred to as the “Null Curriculum.” The idea behind the null curriculum is that schools shape the way students think not only by what they teach, but by what they omit from their teaching. No school or teacher can teach everything, so what is included in the curriculum, therefore, requires choice, and choice means priorities. Unfortunately, those choices often stem from the biases and hegemonic beliefs that are present in that school, school district, or region. Hegemony describes the unspoken, but nevertheless present societal rules that serve to organize and legitimate the activity of the many individuals whose interactions make up the social order (Null, 2011). Hegemony is like hidden curriculum, except that hegemony exists throughout society, not just in schools. In his book *Ideology and Curriculum*, Apple (2004) discusses hegemony as those power structures that allow certain people to rise, while at the same time keeping other groups in lower class positions. According to Apple, “Hegemonic powers must be uncovered, interrogated, and dismantled. Decentering hegemonic powers opens up

space for oppressed groups to rise in power, thereby redefining culture and making society more just” (pg. 20) Hidden curriculum impacts students at many different levels and in many different ways. In the next several pages, I will attempt to analyze the impact that these biases of the hidden curriculum have on the students in our schools. These biases, and their affects will be focused on three different, but equally important areas: cultural, social class, and gender.

### **Cultural Biases and the Hidden Curriculum**

In the United States, there is a norm that is used throughout much of the curriculum that is taught in our schools. In most areas that norm is centered on a white, privileged, heterosexual, male point of view. This idea of “whiteness” and the benefits that come with it have been widely discussed by theorists, educators and politicians for many years. Heidi Barajas and Amy Ronnkvist write about how schools are racialized in way that poses a major advantage to those who are white and a major disadvantage to the non-white. The “school space” that they refer to includes not only physical space but also the meanings and ideologies that are present in the school and permeate the school curriculum. (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007) The myth that exists in schools all throughout our country is that schools try to come across as being a racially neutral space when the underlying whiteness is a mechanism of power that allows the dominant groups ideology to be imposed on other groups, often in subtle ways. Barajas and Ronnkvist (2007) write: “...whiteness is an invisible construct that is often not acknowledged. Not acknowledging the role of ethnicity in the dominant groups’ privileges actually allows whites to keep atop of the societal hierarchy by obscuring its role in maintaining powers and privileges” (pg. 1523).

How schools recognize, integrate, or honor diversity and multicultural perspectives may convey both intentional and unintended messages. For example, most schools expect recently arrived immigrant students and their families to “assimilate” into American culture, by requiring the students to speak English in school at all times or by not providing translated informational

materials or other specialized assistance to parents and families. Other schools, however, may actively integrate or celebrate the multicultural diversity of the student body by inviting students and parents to share stories about their home country, or by posting and publishing informational materials in multiple languages. In one school, non-American cultures may be entirely ignored, while in another they may be actively celebrated, with students experiencing feelings of either isolation or inclusion as a result (The Great Schools Partnership, 2013).

When teaching about diversity, many teachers are afraid to put the “race card” out there because of the potential conflict it might cause in the classroom. But until we get past the “fear” of conflict, this idea of whiteness will not go away. As Jenny Gordon (2005) wrote: “We first need to eliminate the culture of silence we have built up around race and move beyond our fears of revealing our own ignorance and discomfort. We need to move beyond the fear of giving offense” (pg. 144). The goal of curriculum should not be to avoid the topic of race, but to embrace it. Until we begin to understand how race and racism affect our schools, we cannot begin the process of eliminating them from our curriculum. As schools, we need to examine theory, structure, and the practice of racism and power relations embedded in history, and academic disciplines. We need to empower students by validating and acknowledging their everyday experiences. We need to foster critical thinking skills and equip students with anti-racist language and discussion skills and practice anti-racist methods in the classroom. We need to develop a strong sense of community in the classroom – a community that is accepting of all.

Teaching about race and racism in the United States through the school’s curriculum is a complex and emotional process. Students typically bring to class a wide range of feelings, experiences, and awareness’s. Most students sincerely want to learn about racism and how they can play a role in making their communities, schools, and workplaces welcoming places for people of all racial and cultural heritages. Yet fear, distrust, anger, denial, guilt, ignorance, and

the wish for simple solutions can fill the learning process with surprises and emotional intensity (Wijeyesinghe, 1997). However, simply “adding” resources to the current curriculum that would address the thoughts and contributions of the “others” in English, math, science, and social studies, doesn’t make our classrooms and schools any less oppressive. In fact Kevin Kumashiro argues that when you use the “inclusion” method, you might actually be strengthening the biases and stereotypes. Kumashiro (2001) writes: “Although a curriculum that aims for inclusion may succeed in teaching that the different or the ‘other’ is as normal or important as the norm, it does not necessarily change the very definition of “normal” and de-center the ‘mythical norm,’ namely, the White American, male, middle class, heterosexual identities that are traditionally privileged in society” (pg. 5). In other words, simply adding to the current curriculum isn’t enough because the much of the current curriculum centers on “normal” as the white, privileged, heterosexual, male point of view. Until we can change our view of what is “normal” we will make little progress toward an anti-oppressive curriculum.

### **Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum**

The relationship between social class and the hidden curriculum is something that has been debated for many years. Socioeconomic status (SES) is an economic and sociological combined total measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or family's economic and social position in relation to others, based on income, education, and occupation (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Scholars have argued that public schools make available different types of educational experience and curriculum knowledge to students in different social classes. Michael Apple, focusing on school knowledge, argues that knowledge and skills leading to social power and regard - medical, legal, managerial – are made available to the advantaged social groups but are withheld from the working classes to whom a more "practical" curriculum is offered – manual skills, clerical knowledge, and vocational skills (Apple, 2004).

In a sense, some schools are on the vocational education track, while others are geared to produce future doctors, lawyers, and business leaders. In other words, schools teach different “hidden curriculum” to children of different social classes. This hidden curriculum for social class teaches students (directly or indirectly) of the “working class” the skills required of alienated labor – labor controlled and planned by other people. This prepares them for a life of working-class jobs. Middle and upper class children, on the other hand, learn the skills and attitudes that will help them occupy professional jobs (Wijeyesinghe, 1997). Research also indicates that children from low-SES households and communities develop academic skills more slowly compared to children from higher SES groups. The school systems in low-SES communities are often under-resourced, negatively affecting students’ academic progress. Inadequate education and increased dropout rates affect children’s academic achievement, perpetuating the low-SES status of the community (Education & Socioeconomic Status, 2014).

This hidden curriculum in regards to social class can be seen beyond the classroom as well, by way of other services schools offer. Many students in the middle and upper class schools have the opportunity to access top tier healthcare services, receive healthy food for each meal, and have valuable after school programs which provide enrichment (Education & Socioeconomic Status, 2014). They are able to and participate in a host of extra-curricular activities – both academic and athletic – which reinforce the various social practices they learn during the school day. In contrast, many working class and poverty level schools and families, do not have access to public and private funds needed to provide meaningful extra services to students. Instead students partake in extra-curricular activities that do not provide them with mediums for gaining middle, upper, or executive class skills.

Although a wide variety of initiatives have been developed to address the socio-economic gap for educational achievement, evidence regarding their effectiveness is unclear (Education &



Socioeconomic Status, 2014). As a result, there is a need for interventions that seek instead to actively include working-class young people, by supporting their agency to exercise more control over their education, and by valuing their lived experiences and identities.

### **Gender and the Hidden Curriculum**

Schools, more than any other institution, are the means through which young people are socialized in America. In addition to providing students with instruction in academic subjects, schools also provide training in social norms and behaviors. Although efforts have been made to reduce gender inequality in schools since Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 passed into law, men and women are still socialized in a way that emphasizes differences between genders. Gender bias occurs when people make assumptions regarding behaviors, abilities or preferences of others based upon their gender. Because there are strong gender role stereotypes for masculinity and femininity, students who do not match them can encounter problems with teachers and with their peers

Every time girls are required to wear a dress and boys a shirt and tie, we affirm that girls and boys should be treated differently. When a school principal ignores an act of sexual harassment, he or she is indirectly saying that the humiliation of girls is an accepted practice. When different behaviors are tolerated for boys than for girls because 'boys will be boys', schools are reinforcing the stereotypes that males and females should somehow be held to different standards of conduct.

Teachers socialize girls towards a feminine ideal (Chapman, 2014). Girls are praised for being neat, quiet, and calm, whereas boys are encouraged to think independently, be active and speak up. Girls are socialized in schools to recognize popularity as being important, and learn that educational performance and ability are not as important. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to rank independence and competence as more important. Gender bias is also taught

implicitly through the resources chosen for classroom use. Using texts that omit contributions of women, which minimize the experiences of women, or that stereotype gender roles, further compounds gender bias in schools' curriculum (Grumet & Stone, 2000). Today's children have instant access to so many things that didn't even exist just a few years ago and it is having a major impact on how students (both male and female) see themselves fitting in – not just in school, but how they fit into society as a whole. I think many of them are getting the mixed messages about what it means to be a young person in today's society and where they fit in to that social and gender hierarchy. Unfortunately, many of the social pressures that the young men and women are feeling are reinforced by the gender biases that are present in much of the hidden curriculum in schools.

Gender bias and the hidden curriculum do not just pertain to girls. These biases also shed light on some of the masculine stereotypes that many boys face in schools today – especially as they enter middle and high school. This gendered curriculum encapsulates the expectations and pressures that young men feel to be “masculine” in the school setting – from the way their teachers and friends interact with them to the messages of masculinity that shine through the school's hidden curriculum. Gender bias can impact students' attitudes towards learning and their engagement with the subject. Boys may be encouraged to believe that success in science and mathematics should come easily to them because of their gender. As Jim Burns (2013) writes, “Schools are sites where young men are fitted into a hierarchical gender regime based on a stratified curriculum and school culture...schools can serve as spaces in which ruptures in taken-for-granted notions of gender can be explored and nontraditional gender identifications are made possible (pg. 124)

Educators need to be made aware of the bias they are reinforcing in their students through socialization messages, inequitable division of special education services, sexist texts and

materials, and unbalanced time and types of attention spent on boys and girls in the classroom. There are six attributes that need to be considered when trying to establish a gender-equitable curriculum. Gender-fair materials need to acknowledge and affirm these variations – they need to be inclusive, accurate, affirmative, representative, and integrated, weaving together the experiences, needs, and interests of both males and females (Grumet & Stone, 2000). Until we take a hard look at the gender biases that exist in education, more than half of our students will be continue to be short-changed.

### **Conclusion**

The design and goals of any curriculum reflect the educational philosophy – whether intentionally or unintentionally – of the educators who developed it. Generally speaking, the concept of a hidden curriculum in schools has become more widely recognized, discussed, and addressed in recent decades. Anti-oppressive education involves constantly reexamining one's practices that hinder attempts to challenge oppressions. It involves desiring and working through crisis rather than avoiding and masking it. And it involves imagining new possibilities for who we are and who we can be (Kumashiro, 2001). Ideas such as racialized text, gender bias, whiteness, hegemonic relations, social control, commonplaces, and liberating curriculum have arguably led to greater tolerance, understanding, and even celebration of racial, physical, and cultural differences in public schools. In addition, school communities, educators, and students are more likely to actively and openly reflect on or question their own assumptions, biases, and tendencies. Political and social pressures, including factors such as the increased scrutiny that has resulted from online media and social networking, may also contribute to greater awareness of unintended lessons and messages in schools.

That said, a hidden curriculum is, by nature, “hidden,” which means that many of its lessons and messages are difficult to perceive or acknowledge for any number of reasons.

Learning about oppression and unlearning what we had previously learned as being “normal” can be controversial and upsetting. In particular, learning that the very ways in which we think and do things is not only biased, but oppressive, can be very upsetting – which is not what many schools and school districts typically desire. However, as Kumashiro (2005) writes, “Silence and exclusion are significant parts of the “hidden curriculum” being taught in schools – a hidden curriculum that sanctions the partial and oppressive knowledge already in schools and in society” (pg. 4).

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