

The Hidden Curriculum in Public Schools and its Disadvantage to Minority Students

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[Abstract] This essay examines the misappropriations of equal education between students of color and their white counterparts in public schools across the United States. Minority students in public schools are failing due to the shortfall of disparate curriculums, one for public schools in minority neighborhoods and the other one in wealthy communities. This problem is examined by comparing the two hidden curricula's, the formal and the unspoken. Although this divide was not necessarily the intention of some educators, social class and its inequalities took precedence in access to a quality public-school education system.

[keywords] hidden curriculum, public schools, low income, high school, classism, institutionalized racism

Introduction

Historically, public schools were created to provide equal access to quality education to all citizens in the USA, but the reality of getting a public-school education in the 21st century USA tells a different story. Curricula in public schools are designed differently in low income and rich communities. Basil Bernstein, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michael W. Apple 'focusing on school knowledge, have argued 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 [formal] curriculum is offered (manual skills, clerical knowledge)' (Anyon, 1980, p. 1). According to Anyon (1980), 'public schools in complex industrial societies like [the U.S] make available different types of educational experience and curriculum knowledge to students in different social class' (p. 1), for example, Morgan Park High School, located in a low income community with a smaller fiscal policy (Illinois-At-A-Glance Report Card | 2018-2019) compare to Dover-Sherborn Regional High School located in an high-income community and a larger spending advantage (Dover-Sherborn, 2020).

Some historical figures who founded this nation strongly believed 'that the republic could survive only if its citizens were properly educated. This was a collective purpose [and] not simply an individual benefit or payoff to an interest group' (Tyack, 2003, p. 1). Social justice crusaders like Horace Mann (1989), 'believed that schooling should be a common good, open to all, benefiting all, as do clean water and air and leafy parks' (p. 1). Mann, however, might not have imagined that skin color and wealth would have been a deterrence to an equal public-school education under one curriculum umbrella. According to Darling-Hammond (2004), 'large disparities continue to exist in the educational opportunities available to rich and poor [public school] students in most states' (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 1936). These disparities [relate]' to 'schools [located] in low socioeconomic communities as well as...neighborhoods with a predominance of Black and Latino families' (p. 1938)—coupled with 'inadequate [teachers and other educational personnel] to support sound educational decision making or collegial learning' (p. 1944) that can advance their student learning at college level.

Resources in public schools or the lack thereof is a further cause of the divide between wealthy and poor public-school education. It is stated that once upon a time 'public education was "the most American thing about America."' However, many people do not share that view today' (Fife, 2013, p. 219) for several reasons. Some of those negative views can be related to the black American community where 'urban schools are commonly framed as segregated, [under-resourced] institutions with a majority of low-income black or brown students' (Posey-Maddox, 2014, p. 23). The bias in public school curriculum design is

‘harmful to the self-esteem and performance of [black and brown] American school children’ (Binder, 2002, p. 1). These schools lack resources in the classroom and have crumbling buildings, infestations of rodents, and lack of or broken libraries. At Luther Burbank High School, for example, ‘students cannot take textbooks home for homework in any core subject’ (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 1937).

Parents of all walks of life play a big part in their children’s education by choosing which school to enroll their children, but parents in low-income communities do not always have the choice of sending their child to affluent public-schools as their wealthier counterparts. According to Posey-Maddox (2014), ‘parents of all races express support for integrated schools, while middle- and upper income parents tend to choose schools that are whiter and wealthier’ (Posey-Maddox, 2014, p. 41). The ideas, however, of school selections by parents goes a bit deeper. Cultural background plays a salient role in school choice’ [...] white families tend to avoid schools with higher percentages of nonwhite students’ (p. 41).

Consider, for example, the statistics for all four public schools’ demographics of respective student body: King High School with 1,424 total student population [0.2 % white, 99% black, and 0% Hispanic] (King High School student body, 2016-2017). King High School data have not been updated since 2017. Morgan Park High School with 1,225 [0% white, 97% black, and 1% Hispanic] (Illinois-At-A-Glance Report Card | 2018-1019), Dover-Sherborn Regional High School with 680 [79.9% white, 2.9% black, and 4.4% Hispanic] (School and District Profiles, 2020), and Weston High School with 663 [66.7% white, 6.3% black, and 3.5% Hispanic] (School and District Profiles, 2020). It is because of these differences that students and their families in these low-income communities have difficulty making school selection. I will argue that through the design of two classroom curricula’s and the existence of the other curricula including the hidden curriculum that the public-school system is failing its low-income students.

Curriculum’s Hidden Language

As mentioned, where Horace Mann, believed that education should be available and benefiting all. But several kinds of curriculums including the hidden and the formal, both of which can be interpret differently between black and brown and white Americans. ‘Usually, when educators refer to school curriculum, they have explicit, consciously planned course objectives in mind’ (Wren, 1999, p. 594), but that’s not the case here. ‘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’ (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2015).

The argument by John Dewey in *Democracy and Education* (1916) has a thought of how important education is to one’s existence. Dewey, states that ‘living beings maintain themselves by renewal. Among humans, that renewal takes place through a process of cultural transmission, which [is] refers to as “education in its broadest sense”’ (Cremin, 1976, p. 4). Dewey went on to state that ‘education in its broadest sense is continuous, ubiquitous, pervasive, and all-powerful’ (p. 4). In the 21st century, most public-school students in low-income communities are not well educated compared to their counterparts in rich communities, and this would be the divide, historically speaking. However, students are excluded from receiving an education because of the color of their skin and their low-income status. For the 21st Century students, skin color contributes to the problem, but it’s poverty that is continuing the divide. According to Jo Craven McGinty (2019), research published in the *Wall Street Journal* states that, ‘minority students remain disproportionately concentrated in high-poverty areas. Academically, they trail students in more affluent areas, and they fall increasingly behind as the years pass’ (McGinty, 2019, p. A2).

During the 1950s, for example, the ‘liberal stance of educators toward social differences was to deny or ignore them. From this historical period to the present, professional educators were encouraged to be color blind and class blind’ (p. 4), but the result of these institutional deliberate blindness ‘ran the danger of ignoring the powerful effects of institutional racism’ (p. 4). An understanding of this social class system has been simplified somewhat by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, when he states that a ‘useful

framework for understanding social class and its influence on social inequalities in education [,but through the lens of] social class not simply as a position in society linked to income or occupation[,] but as a set of relations shaped by social, cultural, and material/economic factors’ (Posey-Maddox, 2014, p. 8), all of which are controlled by adult professionals in the education system (Cremin, 1976, p. 4). These adult professionals, according to Cremin (1976), the ones who can ‘consciously control the kind of education children [gets do so] by controlling the environment in which they act, think, and feel’ (p. 4).

One of the disadvantages argued in this essay is public schools are divided in rich and low-income communities by level of distributed resources. Rich parents providing high quality and bountiful resources for their children, but parents in low-income communities can ill-afford basic educational utensils for their children in the classrooms. Bourdieu, further states that ‘theoretical constructs are useful in examining family-school relationships because they highlight the social and cultural resources that parents may employ on behalf of their children’ (p. 9).

A combination of income, class, and race are the main cancers of an equal public-school educations with one equal curriculum. The idea, however, of all public school students excelling equally, as noted by Horace Mann, is only a nice “thought” because ‘in typical American fashion, class is entwined with and inflects race to erect complex systems of hierarchy, domination, and disadvantage’ (Lareau & Conley, 2008, p. 265). Race is a social construct, plain and simple, it is not a biological make-up, but it’s that powerful to ‘profoundly shapes American life and social relations’ (Posey-Maddox, 2014, p. 10).

Let’s take a look at King High School, in Detroit Michigan and Morgan Park High School in Chicago, which are both located in a majority black neighborhood with heavy law enforcements patrolling the campuses and its environs. According to Vaught (2011), ‘schools like MLKHS exist in every mid- to large-size urban district in the United States’ (Vaught, 2011). The author did her ethnographic investigations in the Jericho public schools for a period of one year. She concluded that ‘...the reason Black and Brown students are failing in Jericho Public Schools, Jericho New York and in school districts around the nation is both singular and complex: racism. I say this not to state the obvious, but to distinguish this project from those that decanter or differently understand racism’ (pp. 2-3).

She further stated that ‘racism is produced by and produces structural racial domination’ (p. 3). And because of these special privileges, or white privilege for lack of a better word, their children face racial domination in their high schools. The actions of most privileged parents are historical behaviors as Schubert (1986) stated, ‘when we magnify any current educational situation, it is clear that curriculum does not occur in isolation. Curriculum thoughts, decisions, and practices are socially, politically, and culturally constructed,’ (Schubert, 1986, p. 9). Hence, some white parents fight to ensure dominance through various forms of curricula: the concomitant, phantom, hidden, tacit, latent, para-curriculum, societal, and informal. A clearer understanding of these hidden curricula that is taught and translated at mostly public schools in rich communities and at home is stated by Longstreet (1993):

‘The “concomitant curriculum” that is, about those sets of out-of-school learnings derived from the home, church, government, industry, and so forth. The term “phantom curriculum” has been used to represent the kinds of learnings derived from television and other widespread public media. Among the most popular of these many variations on a theme is the “hidden curriculum,” which refers to the kinds of learnings children derive from the very nature and organizational design of the public school, as well as from the behaviors and attitudes of teachers and administrators. Closely related to the hidden curriculum is the “tacit curriculum,” which refers to the set of unwritten school policies and practices that influence children’s learning. Another widely used variant is the “latent curriculum,” which lies deep within each student as the sum of learning that has accumulated from the student’s experiences and background.

There is also the term “para-curriculum,” which refers to the resources for learning available outside the school walls, such as in museums, art institutions, and the like. In 1981, still another term involving curriculum was coined. This was the “societal curriculum,” which, to quote its author, Carlos Cortes, ...is

that massive, ongoing, informal curriculum of family, peer groups, neighborhoods, churches, organizations, occupations, mass media, and other socializing forces that “educate” all of us throughout our lives’ (Longstreet & Shane, 1993, p. 46)

These curricula are a form of education being taught in the above mentioned areas and places, but we have to remember that ‘education is not the same as school, nor is it the same as learning’ (Eisner, 1994, p. 36). ‘What the student learns depends on the curriculum, location, and the range and concentration of subject matter’ (Gross, 1999, p. 72). The idea of students learning, what they learn, and the location where they learn can be supported by John Dewey, who states that ‘there is a marked difference between the education everyone gets simply from living with others and the deliberate education offered by the school’ (Cremin, 1976, p. 4).

Curriculum is not an invented phenomenon, but an existing panorama. ‘Much of what curriculum becomes is forged by political, economic, and value contexts that surround and interpenetrated it. As with all forms of existence, curriculum achieves its character from an ecological embeddedness’ (Schubert, 1986, p. 9), but more precisely in this context, rich and middle-class students learned these different hidden curriculum concept from society, their teachers, fellow students, and their parents—which in the long run, ‘is carried out without benefit of schools, since [these] children learn what they have to know in informal association with the adults who direct their activity’ (Cremin, 1976, pp. 7-8). ‘The use of the term ecological here implies that these contexts of the larger society interact with teachers, learners, other curriculum developers, and the culture of classroom life all at once, each interacting with and influencing the other’ (Schubert, 1986, p. 9). But because black and white Americans are two different cultures, their respective curriculum languages are not strong enough to influence each other for a positive and cohesive solution of equality and inclusion in education.

It is difficult to co-exist equally for inclusion teaching, because some of these public schools, for example, King High School and Morgan Park are “guaranteeing” that only a specified number of students are selected for higher levels of education because of their “ability” to contribute to the maximization of the production of the technical knowledge also needed by the economy’ (Apple, 2004, p. 59). This form of teaching in the public schools where ‘valuative consensus in the everyday regularities...did not spring up overnight’ (p. 59). Its historical concept is in the American education system.

Parent Engagement

The differences between low-income schools and rich educational schools found primarily in what is taught and not taught in the classrooms. ‘The job of schooling is to reproduce salient knowledge and values for the succeeding generation’ (Bortis, Bardadym, & Emmenegger, 1999, p. 63). Community leaders, parents, teachers, and government officials are the ones tasked with ‘identifying the skills, knowledge, and appreciations to be taught. It is the job of professional educators to see that they are transformed into a curriculum that can be delivered to children and youth’ (Schubert, 1986, p. 29). Meaning, a child’s education and development is the school’s and the home’s responsibility, but at home parents are not always available. So, most of those parents put their trust in the educational system to educate their children. But like William Schubert (1986) states, ‘it is impossible for parents who have specialized jobs [(or in some cases, minimum wage jobs)] to teach adequately all the complicated capabilities that their children’s needs.

Moreover, in earning a living, they scarcely have the time to do so, even if they do have the knowledge, inclination, and ability’ (p. 29). Hence, there is a need for many parents to send their children to specific schools to ensure they receive the proper education and support to advance their educational abilities. Most white parents, however, know better than to solely trust any public educational institution and would send their children to ‘special institutions to reproduce the culture for their children’ (p. 29). But can public schools in depressed and segregated neighborhoods be able to teach its majority black and brown students how to understand what is imbedded in the hidden curriculum? Hence, we have here the continuing cause

of an unequal education in this 21st century: poverty (McGinty, 2019, p. A2). Longstreet and Shane (1993) explains that:

‘implementing a curriculum design is a complex cultural undertaking involving major political, psychological, and cultural considerations. Politics of every sort and at every level of society affect the curriculum implementation process, complicating many times over what may appear at first glance to be no more than a simple process of translating the overall curriculum design into a practical plan for student learning’ (Longstreet & Shane, 1993, p. 93).

Teaching Cultural Norms and The Hidden Curriculum:

The teaching of social and cultural norms is beyond important. They are concepts that some low-income students might not have thought of when in high school. So, most likely these high school students being taught these curriculums, at least some, may not get it or know how important they are to one’s development. There are only two communities, rich and low-income. Firstly, parents of high school students who are not well-educated and live in depressed communities, at least some, are not aware of the importance of the hidden cultural curriculum being taught in some schools. Subjects like math, science, English, etc. are the formal curriculums in public schools in low income communities, as they are in rich neighborhoods. Most individuals see various advertisements and movies on television: sports cars, jewelries, expensive suits, money clips filled with money (not rolled up in rubber bands), etc., and we strive for this high class living and income. Some work two or three jobs to make ends meet, but still, are not close to even making rent money. Some continue to struggle while others give up and turn to other means of earning. For example, drugs, prostitution, and other illicit activities until gentrification comes to their community (Apple & King, 1977).

Secondly, there are the rich communities, where parents send their children to good schools, parents have medium to high income, and schools that teach their children the same math, science, English, etc., but with added curricula both hidden and formal. What can be examples of both hidden and formal curricula is what these students see, know, and are taught (Apple W., 2004, p. 5). For example, ‘the first wisdom of [education] is this: things are not what they seem. [A public-school education] reality turns out to have many layers of meaning. The discovery of each...layer changes the perception of the whole’ (Brosnan, C. & Turner, S. B., 2009, p. 15). Some of these layers in the

‘hidden Curriculum refers to messages communicated by the organization and operation of schooling apart from the official public statements of school mission and subject area curriculum guidelines.... The messages of hidden curriculum usually deal with attitudes, values, beliefs, and behavior’ (Berger, 1963, p. 16).

Early childhood training starts in nursery school because as Apple (2004) claims, ‘the early childhood experience discipline in American public schools ‘appears to exert its most powerful and lasting influence on the attitudes and the behavior of children by acclimating them to a classroom environment’ (Apple, W., p. 49). At this age it is important for learning norms, definitions of social interactions, how to share, listen, ‘put things away, and to follow the classroom routine’ (p. 60). While in nursery school, these pupils are receiving their ‘first initiation into the social dimension of the world of work. The content of specific lessons is relatively less important than the experience of being a worker’ (p. 54). By these few but critical mentioned examples of nursery school pupils, they are being groomed ‘for a variety of different but specific adult life functions’ (p. 71). So, when they get older, they will put all of it together.

A better explanation for this example is the social control through ‘a hidden function of the school’ (Giroux, Purpel, 1983, p. 9). Its where ‘kindergarten experience serves as a foundation for the years of schooling to follow’ (p. 89). The author further states that nursery school pupils who attended kindergarten are better students by far and well prepared for primary schools compared to pupils who did not attend nursery school. This can be understood because certain training during nursery school age is embedded in these children’s psyche ‘as part of learning to exhibit socialized behavior’ (p. 92). These children further

learn and train to ‘tolerate ambiguity and discomfort in the classroom and to accept a considerable degree of arbitrariness in their school activities’ (p. 92).

The ‘hidden curriculum is not something one just finds; one must go hunting for it [because] a hidden curriculum is a set of learning states, ultimately one must find out what is learned as a result of practices, procedures, rules, relationships, structures, and physical characteristics which constitute a given setting[,]’ (Giroux & Purpel, 1983, p. 126) and its continuance through the young lives of students starting from nursery school.

American students are born into a divided country which filters down into their schooling. Some might wonder why high schools in low-income communities are lacking so many resources compared to their counterparts in richer areas. Most public schools received financial and other resources from the United States government, and in most cases those financial grants are not close enough to cover the cost for proper heating and cooling maintenance or “weeds growing out of the asphalt” (Posey-Maddox, 2014, p. 42).

Schools in the richer communities, along with government grants, would receive large sums of financial donations from community leaders, parents, and alumni. With such large amount of private funding from wealthy donors, wealthy public schools can afford to have up to date technology and countless amounts of resources to upkeep a five-star appearance. For example, Morgan Park budget for fiscal year 2018-2019 was \$13,112 (Illinois-At-A-Glance Report Card | 2018-2019), Dover-Sherborn Regional High School for 2017 was \$9,915,962. Weston High School 2020 budget is \$41,441,391 (Financial Section, 2020). This is another example of Apple’s and King’s thoughts that ‘the curriculum in [these rich] schools responds to and represents ideological and cultural resources that come from somewhere (Apple & King, 1977).

Conclusion

Not everyone can see and understand the true purpose of a curriculum because it is written in many languages. I don’t mean cultural languages, I’m talking about its meaning based on who is using it: students, teachers, parents, and academic professionals can all interpret a U.S public school curriculum differently based on cultural backgrounds between white and black and brown Americans. But as mentioned earlier, ‘implementing a curriculum design is a complex cultural undertaking involving major political’ (Longstreet & Shane, 1993, p. 93) input, ‘as curriculum is a political tool used to help achieve school objectives’ (Daly, Schall, Skeelee, 2001, p. 71). So, if the political and or the decision makers’ agendas changes ‘so, too, do school objectives and curricula’ (p. 71).

Some decision makers states that there are no definitions of what a class category is, or at least, none that civil society or government official would publicly use, ‘but social scientists use a combination of income, occupation, and education as common markers of class status’ (Posey-Maddox, 2014, p. 8) to define rich and poor Americans or low income and rich communities. And they are the ones responsible for the large amount of disparities that exist in the educational system. The disenfranchised students are black and brown public-school students who are located in low socioeconomic communities (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 1936).

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) states that to understand ‘social class and its influence on social inequalities in education’ (Posey-Maddox, 2014, p. 8), one has to first ‘see social class not simply as a position in society linked to income or occupation but as a set of relations shaped by social, cultural, and material/economic factors’ (p. 8). Meaning, along with material wealth, ‘dispositions, and attitudes of individuals and groups’ (p. 8), class is entwined as a way to erect a hidden domination and disadvantage through the various forms of curriculums (p. 10). Meaning, the two curricula interpret differently based on black and brown and white Americans.

One curriculum for a five-star public school which is a different language for low-income public schools’ students and the other curriculum designed for low-income public-school students that cannot be construed for high income public schools’ students. Does this gap between Public Schools matter? Yes,

because in the 21st century the divide within the U.S public school system is based on cultural background and poverty that will continue. Historically, the divide relates to one's skin color, presently, the main focus for the divide is poverty—though one's skin color still remains a factor.

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