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EDITORIAL

Tracing and countering the “hidden”

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“With the truth hidden, there will be little expression of thought to the contrary.”
Carter G. Woodson, 1933, The Mis-Education of the Negro

Curriculum inquiry has always been about more than just designs, implementations, or evaluations. While it may be true that for the general public, and even for many educators, such technical tasks are the extent of what constitutes curriculum, curriculum scholars have always situated their work within a broader conception that extends well beyond what seems most obvious. One concept curriculum scholars have often mobilized to see beyond what meets the eye is the well-worn notion of the “hidden curriculum.” While the term was first coined by Philip Jackson (1990) in his important book Life in Classrooms, the notion that there is always more to curriculum than what is planned can be traced back to Carter G. Woodson’s (1933) The Mis-Education of the Negro. Woodson’s project was to unearth the hidden dynamics of a schooling system that, as he shows, was designed not only to keep Black people oppressed but also to use Black teachers themselves as the instruments of such oppression. Since the reconceptualization of curriculum studies in the 1970s, the concept of the “hidden curriculum” has been used to examine a wide range of educational experiences. From studies of the functional role of labels and the differential power relations between teachers and students in the classroom to broader examinations of ideological hegemony and conflict, the “hidden curriculum” has been a key concept in curriculum studies.

Each of the four articles in this issue of Curriculum Inquiry offers insights into the importance of paying attention to what is hidden in order to better understand both the larger forces that shape educational experiences as well as to develop strategies for rethinking classroom practice. While none of the authors make use of the concept of the hidden curriculum directly, they all bring light to the fact that there is always more to learning and teaching than what manifests in educational intentions. Utilizing different methodological tools and analytic foci, the authors featured in this issue interrogate the “official” ideologies that inform the objects of their inquiry. The first two articles draw on classroom-based research and bring attention to the hidden dynamics that shape classroom interaction. Closer to Jackson’s (1990) original focus on classrooms, the authors of these two articles focus directly on functional ways of shifting the power dynamics between students and teachers. By contrast, the last two articles draw attention to the hidden ways in which discourses and ideologies shape educational experiences at a macro-social level. This approach reflects a broader focus on how hegemony and the dominant ideologies of
colonialism, racism, sexism, and ableism shape educational institutions and experiences (see Erevelles, 2005; Grande, 2015; Yosso, 2002).

First, in her article, “Including More Voices: Challenging the Emphasis on Memoir in an Early Childhood Classroom,” Cara E. Furman challenges the underlying premises that inform a commitment to personal narrative as a strategy for literacy instruction. Noting that personal narrative is always “a performance of self that is constructed to make a particular impression” (p. 253), Furman observes how “hidden” beneath the assumption of the value of personal narrative are certain expectations about what kinds of personal experiences are worthy of telling as well as unspoken expectations about how personal narratives should unfold and what constitutes an appropriate response. These hidden expectations, Furman notes, enable children from normative family contexts and middle-class backgrounds to properly tell and write, as well as respond to, personal narratives. By contrast, Furman observes, young children who do not live in normative family circumstances sometimes choose not to abide by such expectations, either because they do not have the right kind of personal experience to narrate or because they simply do not wish to share such experiences with teachers. Furman argues that such resistances are not expressions of limited capacities, but of the students’ desires to protect their personal narratives from the strictures of literacy instruction.

In response, Furman makes a strong case for the use of fiction as an alternative to personal narrative, observing that the students who resisted personal narrative used fiction in order to participate in class discussions and to insert themselves into their own stories. Furman shows how a focus on fiction opened up the writing exercises to a wider range of narrative styles and gave all children opportunities to craft texts that more creatively engaged their personal experiences. On the one hand, fiction can become a genre through which students remain in control of their own personal story; on the other hand, through fiction students visualize alternatives and project themselves into imaginary worlds that actually reveal a great deal about their personal conditions, albeit indirectly. “In encouraging fiction,” Furman concludes, “we support children in processing the world as it is as well as how it could be” (p. 258). Furman cautions that, in the end, “writing is no salvation” (p. 258). She invites educators to carefully consider the broader social circumstances that surround children’s lives and to think carefully about what children bring into the classroom as a source for motivation and to shape the spaces in, and the practices through, which they engage students.

To some extent, Furman’s argument for the importance of fiction supports the notion that sometimes, in order to address the consequences of the hidden dynamics of the classroom for students with certain characteristic or who are subjected to particular labels, it is necessary to trace not just what is hidden, but also what is excluded. In her article, “Quality Educational Opportunities for Bilinguals Experiencing Learning Difficulties Through Multigenerational Place-based Science Inquiry,” Patricia Martínez-Álvarez demonstrates how students can draw on multigenerational learning experiences from home in order to challenge the “structural learning barriers” that are usually enacted by teachers, even as they are often hidden from view. Specifically, hidden underneath labels that characterize students “as experiencing learning difficulties” are assumptions about intelligence and aptitude that reflect racist hierarchies.

Martínez-Álvarez draws on data from an afterschool programme that sought to use students’ home experiences and intergenerational exchange as a source of scientific concepts
and as a strategy to encourage how students labelled with disabilities came to see themselves as scientists. Conceptualizing the afterschool programme as a “third space” in which school and home knowledge can overlap, she shows that when educators encourage students to make connections between scientific concepts and their home experiences and culturally specific knowledge, they developed more expansive conceptions of what it means to be a scientist. Martínez-Álvarez illustrates this using examples of visual materials created by two “emergent bilinguals” that have also been labelled with learning disabilities. In each case, the images created by the students and the stories they told showed the complex ways in which science knowledge was imbricated in their home life and manifested through intergenerational exchanges that were more often than not plurilingual.

In her work, Martínez-Álvarez underscores the well-established notion that connecting to students’ home knowledge, or what Luis Moll and his colleagues (1989) famously called “funds of knowledge,” should be central to engaging students. While the idea of integrating students’ home cultures and knowledge may seem logical and has perhaps become commonplace among progressive curriculum scholars, implicit in most mainstream classrooms is a devaluing of students home cultures, particularly when it comes to scientific knowledge (Burke & Bazzul, 2016). As such, Martínez-Álvarez makes a significant contribution by focusing on the specific disciplinary context of science education and by centring the particular needs of emergent bilingual children that have been labelled as learning disabled. For these particular children, the assumptions of the hidden curriculum have a significant impact, excluding them from the formal curriculum and limiting their ability to engage with science concepts and see themselves as scientists. Addressing this requires an engagement with the kinds of multigenerational learning that are usually left outside of schools, showing how cultural knowledge can counter the hidden ways in which schools reproduce social exclusions through teaching practices.

While in the contexts highlighted in the first two articles home and cultural knowledge work to counter the hidden dynamics of the classroom, in the context of the third article it is the underlying ideological assumptions of local knowledge that undergird how social reproduction operates. In “The 3Rs: Parental Risk Management Strategies in the International Secondary Education Market (ISEM),” Pere Ayling reveals the implicit assumptions that shape how upper-class Nigerian parents justify the choice to send their children abroad to elite boarding schools. Specifically, Ayling shows how race, class, and gender ideologies intersect in the various discursive strategies that Nigerian parents use to justify their choice to send children to international elite schools. Here, Ayling traces how ideology becomes expressed through the discourses upper-class parents use to justify their choices and strategies to avert certain kinds of risks related to their children’s education. Drawing on first-hand interviews with Nigerian parents who have chosen different paths through the ISEM, Ayling highlights three processes or strategies through which parents seek to manage the risk of sending their children to boarding schools abroad, primarily in the UK. First, she shows how selecting the “right time” is crucial for how parents navigate their ambivalent feelings about the influence of Western cultural values on their children. For these upper-class parents, it is crucial that their children incorporate the right amount of “Britishness” while at the same time averting the risk of becoming a “whats-up child,” and losing their particular “Africaness.” Second, parents fret over the “right country” to send their children abroad and make geographic choices that reflect both their wealth as well as their values related to gender roles and sexuality. Averting the risk that
girls might become “promiscuous” sometimes trumps their preference for Britain as the place to become properly elite. Even when parents can afford to send their children to Britain, choosing the “right school,” the third “R” in Ayling’s triad, is essential for averting the risk that upper-class Nigerian children might stray from their religious roots, or worse, learn the wrong kind of British accent.

Tracing the mostly hidden sociocultural factors that shape both the parents’ perceptions of risk as well as how they seek to mitigate those risks, Ayling’s article makes an important contribution to the literature on elite schooling by showing how non-Western elites engage the ISEM. This “ISEM” is saturated by upper and upwardly mobile families in search for the right kind of private education for their children, who mostly benefit from the hidden ideological forces that shape global inequality. On the other end of the economic spectrum, the children of immigrants and refugees attending public schools in “Western” countries face different kinds of hidden ideological forces that typically put them at risk of exclusion and racial violence. In the final article in this issue, titled “Whose Race Problem?: Tracking Patterns of Racial Denial in US and European Educational Discourses on Muslim Youth,” Thea Abu-El Haj, Anne Ríos-Rojas, and Reva Jaffe-Walter examine the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which anti-Muslim sentiments are couched in ostensibly humanist values in three liberal democracies.

Drawing comparisons from their individual school ethnographies in three different national contexts – the United States, Denmark, and Spain – the authors argue that although each context has its own particular “narrative” about immigrants, in all three nations Muslims are positioned as “impossible subjects” in similar ways. They trace how anti-Muslim racism is couched in and expressed through liberal ideology in ways that are, on the one hand, particular to how nationalism is expressed in each country, while on the other expressed in broader articulations of what it means to be human enough to be included across all three nations. In all three contexts, for instance, Muslims were seen as incapable of enacting forms of civic participation that were seen as necessary for the functioning of a liberal democracy. This included views of individualism that invariably cast Muslims as irrational and incapable of making individual choices. Moreover, in all three contexts, notions of liberal tolerance were mobilized to, first, cast Muslims as intolerant and, as a consequence, position them beyond the bounds of what the nation can tolerate in order to ensure modern liberalism.

The alternative, the authors suggest, is nothing less than a reimagining of the terms through which liberalism imagines civic engagement and, at a more profound level, a rethinking of what it means to be human. The authors show how liberalism sets the terms of exclusion precisely through the very concepts it uses to operationalize inclusion. Countering the hidden and not so hidden ways in which individualism and tolerance are mobilized to cast aside Muslim youth requires active and deliberate attempts to interrupt exclusionary practices. Echoing Furman’s argument for fictional narrative as a tool to challenge exclusion, Abu El-Haj, Ríos-Rojas, and Jaffe-Walter insist that countering dominant ideology requires rewriting the story of the human (see also Wynter & Mckittrick, 2015).

Together, the four articles in this issue of Curriculum Inquiry underscore the importance of looking beyond the obvious and engaging in deep analyses of the various hidden layers that shape the curriculum. All four articles point to the need to excavate the hidden in order to imagine what might be possible if we are to engage in educational projects that advance equity and social justice. For Woodson, attending to the hidden was
necessary in order to express the possibility that things might be otherwise, as expressed in the epigraph that opens this editorial. In his case, the project at stake was no less than countering the entire educational apparatus through which anti-Black racism was produced and enacted. For Furman and Martínez-Alvarez, the classroom is the key location for such enactments, and they offer specific strategies for countering the hidden dynamics of teacher and student interactions.

For Ayling, analysing the underlying tensions that shape how upper-class parents make choices shows the imbrication of class, gender, and racial logics in how globalization ensures class dominance. For Abu El-Haj, Ríos-Rojas, and Jaffe-Walter, what is at stake is the very idea of what it means to be human and how liberal humanism ideologically excludes Muslim youth as less than human. As they conclude, such a project of reimagining is “less about revalorizing liberal principles such as individual freedom and tolerance, and more about deconstructing and reevaluating the dominant storyline of liberalism itself in order to render other human stories possible” (p. 331). Such reimagining – or to once again quote Woodson, any “expression of thought to the contrary” – must trace the hidden curriculum and present alternatives that might, at the very least, open up possible futures.

References


