

1 Education

Text

The hidden curriculum and class, gender, and racial/ethnic inequalities

According to conflict theorists, the hidden curriculum is the transmission of cultural values and attitudes, such as conformity and obedience to authority, through implied demands found in the rules, routines, and regulations of schools (Snyder, 1971).

Although all students are subjected to the hidden curriculum, students who are from low-income families and/or are African American or Hispanic (Latino) may be affected the most adversely by educational settings that have been established on the basis of upper- and middle-class white (non-Hispanic) values, attitudes, and behavior (AAUW, 2008). When teachers from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds instruct students from lower-income families, the teachers often establish a more structured classroom and a more controlling environment for students. These teachers may also have lower expectations for students' academic achievements. Schools with many students from low-income families often emphasize procedures and rote memorization without focusing on decision-making and choice, or on providing explanations of why something is done in a particular way. Schools for middle-class students stress the processes (such as calculations and decision-making) involved in getting the right answer. Schools for affluent students focus on creative activities in which students express their own ideas and apply them to the subject under consideration. Schools for students from elite families work to develop students' analytical powers and critical-thinking skills, applying abstract principles to problem-solving.

Through the hidden curriculum, schools inadvertently make students from lower-income families aware that when they grow up, they will be expected to take orders from others, arrive at work punctually, follow bureaucratic rules, and experience high levels of boredom without complaining. Over time, these students may become frustrated with the educational system, not seeking how it can benefit them. As a result, they drop out or become low in academic achievement, which then makes it impossible for them to attend college and gain the credentials required for better-paying occupations and professions (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Educational credentials are extremely important in nations which emphasize credentialism—a process of social selection in which class advantage and social status are linked to the possession of academic qualifications (Collins, 1979; Marshall, 1998). Credentialism is closely related to meritocracy—defined as a social system in which status is assumed to be acquired through individual ability and effort (Young, 1994, 1958). Persons who acquire the appropriate credentials for a job are assumed to have gained the position through what they know, not who they are or whom they know. According to conflict theorists, the hidden curriculum determines in advance that the most valued credentials will primarily stay in the hands of the middle and upper classes, so the United States is not actually as meritocratic as some might claim.

The hidden curriculum is also related to gender bias. For many years, the focus in education was on how gender bias harmed girls and women: reading materials, classroom activities, and treatment by teachers and peers contributed to a feeling among many girls and young women that they were less important than male

students. The accepted wisdom was that, over time, differential treatment undermines females' self-esteem and discourages them from taking certain courses, such as math and science, which have been dominated by male teachers and students. In the early 1990s, the American Association of University Women issued *The AAUW report: How schools shortchange girls*, which highlighted inequalities in women's education and started a national debate on gender equality (AAUW, 1995). Over the past decade, improvements have occurred in girls' educational achievement, as females have attended and graduated from high school and college at a higher rate than their male peers. More females have enrolled in advanced placement or honors courses and in academic areas, such as math and science, when they had previously lagged (AAUW, 2008). However, some traditional gender differences persist at some grade levels, with boys generally outscoring girls on math tests by a small margin and girls outscoring boys on reading tests by a small margin.

Ironically, after many years of discussion about how the hidden curriculum and other problems in schools served to disadvantage female students, the emphasis has now shifted to the question of whether girls' increasing accomplishments from elementary school to college and beyond have come at the expense of boys and young men. But this is not true, according to research by the AAUW (2008:2): "Educational achievement is not a zero-sum game, in which a gain for one group results in a corresponding loss for the other. If girls' success comes at the expense of boys, one would expect to see boys' scores decline as girls' scores rise, but this has not been the case."

Generally, positive trends in the educational attainment of both women and men mask the fact that many students are not making gains in school and that important variations in achievement exist by race/ethnicity and family income level (AAUW, 2008). For example, studies show that family income level has a strong influence on reading scores: scores for boys and girls from similar family income levels are usually more alike than are the scores for boys and girls from different family income levels (AAUW, 2008). When we look at the variation in scores by family income, girls from higher-income families score higher on average than lower-income girls in both math and reading tests. Regardless of gender, large differences remain in scores on academic tests among students by race/ethnicity.

How are race/ethnicity and family income related to high-school and college achievement? The AAUW report (2008:52) sums up the situation as follows:

Race/ethnicity and family income level are important factors in high-school and college achievement, regardless of gender. The story is familiar: white children are more likely to graduate from college than are their African American and Hispanic peers. Likewise, children from lower-income families are less likely to graduate from high school. Students from lower-income families are approximately five times more likely than students from higher-income families to drop out of high school. Women and men from lower-income families are also less likely to attend, much less graduate from, college.

The conflict theorists' focus on the hidden curriculum calls our attention to the fact that students learn far more—both positively and negatively—than just the subject matter that is being taught in classrooms. They are exposed to a wide range of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations that are not directly related to subjects such as English, algebra, or history. Conflict theorists suggest that inequality is structurally produced and reproduced by formal and informal socialization processes in schools and other educational settings.

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