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CLASS, RACE, AND THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM OF SCHOOLS

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My students rarely out themselves as being poor. You could not tell they struggle financially by the papers they turn in to me or by what they say when we discuss things in my sociology classes at the University of St. Thomas. During office hours, however, students reveal to me that they grew up poor, and often they tell me that they are the first person from their family to go to college. They talk about the social distance they feel from their peers who have money. They tell me they often hang out with other poor students to avoid being reminded of what they simply don't have. Many low-income students do not own cars. They are less likely to dine at off-campus restaurants or to have an entire wardrobe of brand-name clothes. They do not go to vacation resorts on spring break. They get tired of being reminded of these differences when they are with wealthier students.

The same unease students feel with their more affluent peers can transfer over to their professors. They may not reach out to their professors when they are performing poorly in the class, fearing that they will be judged as lacking in the ability to succeed in school.

Starting in kindergarten, schools rarely reward poor students for the qualities they bring to their schools: their perseverance, compassion, flexibility, patience, and creativity, just to name a few. Instead they are judged on qualities determined by dominant cultural norms: the attitudes, preferences, tastes, mannerisms, and abilities valued by a system that never was designed to meet their needs (Apple, 1982, 1990). They find themselves at a disadvantage in such a system, and this extends into college experiences. Their teachers and college professors rarely reward them for their diversity of attitudes, preferences, tastes, mannerisms, and abilities or encourage them to draw on their own experiences to achieve in school. Social justice is rarely a subject introduced as part of their education.

The Unrecognized Strength of My Home

My own story provides an example of the complex way such a situation plays out in schools. My older brother and I grew up in a single-parent household.

I was shaped and nurtured by my mother and grandmother. My mother graduated from a Mississippi high school, and while she eventually earned a certificate in early childhood education from a community college in Milwaukee, she primarily worked at jobs that paid minimum wage. My grandmother, who had only a sixth-grade education, was a former sharecropper and domestic servant in Mississippi. They raised me to respect adults and people in authority. I was socialized to say "ma'am" and "sir" when addressing my elders. I was a quiet and shy child, and for the most part, I followed adults' instructions and rules. In this way I was raised to be compliant, one element of the hidden curriculum in our schools. This insistence on compliance is also one aspect of schooling that keeps some students from feeling they can challenge the very structures that repress them. They often feel silenced and alienated from public education at an early age.

In my household, we did not have many books. I believe my lack of books contributed to my below average reading test scores. In third grade I was reading at a second-grade level. Research indicates that social class can influence cognitive abilities because a lack of money results in fewer experiences at museums and traveling, fewer books in the home, and less access to preschool education (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Good & Brophy, 1987). My teacher, Ms. Skinner, recommended that my mother make sure I read during the summer to improve my skills. My mother responded by taking me to the public library every week during the summer. She made sure I read three or four books each week. She also purchased a set of encyclopedias and dictionaries for our home. The following year, I was placed in the fourth-grade-reading-level class. This is what I brought to school: the support of a strong, persistent mother and grandmother. In descriptions of poor children, such remarkable families are rarely mentioned. They run counter to the deficit descriptions of poverty educators are used to hearing.

My mother and grandmother instilled in me a faith in God. They provided me with an abundance of love. But there were some things they simply could not do to prepare me to succeed in a public school geared toward middle-class and wealthier students.

The Complexity of Racism and Classism

As a youth, I was psychologically equipped to confront racism in school. I was taught by my mother to stand up for myself when people used racial slurs. She consistently reminded my brother and me that we should never feel inferior because of the color of our skin. However, I was not adequately prepared to address classism in the education system. There was no pride in being poor. In fact, I did not know anyone who marched in the streets with their fist in the air saying, "Poor is beautiful." I loved being Black, but I hated being poor.

In my early years, I was bussed with other Black students to a predominantly White school in order to further integration. For the first time, I noticed racial and class differences. Most of us who were bussed received "free lunch" tickets. White students made jokes about Black students being poor and wearing off-brand clothes and shoes. I also heard my White "friend" Steve call Rebecca, another Black girl, a "nigger." I asked why he called Rebecca a nigger. He responded, "Because she is one, but don't worry, Buffy, you are not, you are Black." The only distinction between Rebecca and me that I can remember is that Rebecca would speak loudly. She hung out exclusively with the other few Black students in school. Although I socialized with both Black and White students, I self-identified as "Black." After the name-calling, and after I realized the students who were not compliant and submissive were the ones who were ridiculed, I questioned my friendships with White students.

According to some scholars, the school system privileges individuals who comply with dominant culture, like that of middle-class and upper-middle-class teachers, professional staff, and administrators (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Musoba & Baez, 2009). Bourdieu suggests that these privileges are likely to be based less on merit or hard work than on the cultural attitudes, behaviors, norms, and values of dominant groups. Because Rebecca was assertive and independent, she was penalized. And of course her race made her an especially easy target. It is when these two come together that we see how poverty and race intermingle to marginalize students. Low-income students are more likely to achieve positive educational outcomes (e.g., passing test scores or graduating) once their strengths are recognized, affirmed, and rewarded to the same degree that their middle-class peers' are. Because I was respectful and did not disagree with or challenge other students or educators, teachers accepted me. I was one of the "good ones." My compliance and obedience were rewarded with good grades.

However, there were things about the hidden curriculum that became more relevant in high school. My African American teacher had suggested I take an honors class in ninth grade. The majority of the students in the class were White. Only one other person of color, a Black male, was in the class. As I listened to students talk about the different places they visited during their summer vacations, I felt more and more out of place and uncomfortable. I made eye contact with and smiled at some students, but no one reached out to me. Suddenly a short, stout, White woman approached me, introduced herself as Ms. Hill, and stated she was happy I was in her class. She introduced me to the class, directing their attention my way, and asked the students to introduce themselves to me.

As class went along Ms. Hill called on different individuals to read aloud passages from a text. Next, she asked us to analyze the passages and look for larger social meanings in them. I was uncomfortable speaking out because I did not want to make dumb comments. During the second week of school,

Ms. Hill said she wanted me to come see her during my lunch hour. Immediately, I thought I was going to be kicked out of the honors class. As I entered the room, she warmly smiled and invited me to sit in a chair near her desk. She asked me if I liked her class, and I quietly told her it was a good class. Then, she told me she believed I belonged in the class, and she wanted me to start participating in discussions. I promised to do my best. She was instructing me in a part of the hidden curriculum, that speaking up in class is important for my success.

To my own surprise, I raised my hand the next day. Ms. Hill smiled. She appreciated my remarks and agreed with many of my comments. Some of the students also remarked that they shared my perspective. After class Ms. Hill gave me a nod and wink and said, "Good job." I continued to participate in class and received Bs and B+s on my written assignments.

Ms. Hill invited me again to come to her office during my lunch period. She wanted to let me know that she noticed my progress. She also invited me to come see her any time to talk about school issues or other concerns.

Although I did not easily open up to people, I talked with her about my fears and challenges in school. I shared with her my self-doubt about my academic abilities. I also revealed to her my shame in being poor, that I shared a bedroom with my mother, and that we did not have a car. I told her I felt driven to succeed in school. I trusted her and shared stories with her I never had shared with anyone outside of my family and closest friends. I finally had found a teacher who really liked "all" of me. Ms. Hill invited me to eat my lunch in her office two or three times a week. We talked about what I needed to do to prepare for college. She promised to write a letter to the National Honor Society for me. She said that she would make a phone call to her friends in the admissions office on my behalf if I attended her alma mater, a private liberal arts college for women. She was walking me through the hidden curriculum step-by-step. From her I learned about recommendations, college essays, and making connections.

All this time I was becoming more and more comfortable in the honors class. Ms. Hill's approval and excitement over my reflections made the other students in the class acknowledge my existence. The honors students never became my friends—my friends were in nonhonors classes—but they were cordial to me.

Class and Race Together Complicate This Narrative

Unfortunately, toward the middle of the school year, all this changed. We had begun reading Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The class started as usual with Ms. Hill selecting passages for students to read aloud. It appeared to me that most of the passages she selected used the word *nigger* in them. Every time one of my classmates read the passages and said "nigger,"

I became angry. I do not know if it was the tone in their voice or the fact that they would look at me before or after they said the "N word," but it made me uncomfortable and furious.

Finally I felt compelled to say something. I raised my hand and asked Ms. Hill, "Why do we have to read a book with the 'N word' in it?" She remarked that it was an American classic. I stated that just because it is a classic does not make it okay to use the "N word." I also suggested that if we must read the text, we could refer to it as the "N word." Ms. Hill gave me a long stare and then looked away shaking her head. She instructed the class to read what was written. When it was my turn to read a passage, I skipped over all the "N words."

Ms. Hill's face and neck were red, and her eyes were full of disappointment and anger. I did not know why she was angry with me. I had simply expressed my opinion about the use of racist language. She had trained us to analyze literature, and that is what I thought I was doing.

The next day, Ms. Hill did not warmly greet me at the beginning of class. I raised my hand, and she called on me last. When I shared my perspective, she was noticeably silent. She had something positive to say about everyone else's comments but mine. Soon this treatment became the new norm. I stopped meeting with her during my lunch periods. As weeks passed, Ms. Hill never gave me praise, so I became silent again. This time my silence did not matter to my classmates or Ms. Hill. No one cared. I was invisible to them. My class participation declined, as did my grades. I once was perceived as a promising college-bound student, but now I was treated as a dumb kid. I questioned whether I was academically ready for college. If I could not do well in my honors class, how could I succeed in college? I wonder whether one of the more privileged students would have been celebrated as assertive for raising the same concerns that resulted in me being seen as a troublemaker.

Lessons Learned From Ms. Hill's Class

Today, when I reflect on Ms. Hill's class, I realize that I simply did not know one of the most important aspects of the hidden curriculum: build social capital with teachers, guidance counselors, and other professional staff. If I had established a strong mentoring relationship with Mrs. Locket, who had referred me to the honors class in the first place, and with others in the building, they could have given me advice on how to handle the situation with Ms. Hill. They could also have used their relationships with Ms. Hill to advocate for me. But I can't help but wonder why this was left up to me. I was left vulnerable to a teacher who had seemed to understand me. What does this say about barriers many poor students face in our schools—that they are left to the mercy of whatever teacher happens to connect with them?

I could have approached Ms. Hill in private to express my concerns about the book instead of raising them in public. I could have talked with Ms. Hill about ways to improve my grades. But because I did not understand the hidden curriculum, I did what many young people do when they feel disconnected from their teachers: I became disengaged from the learning process. In my case the combination of race and class informed my situation. For others it may be assertive behavior related to issues of poverty that lead to teachers or administrators admonishing them. This is a dangerous reality for poor students who need support from their teachers in order to advocate for themselves and for economic justice.

Teachers can play a major role in helping students feel engaged and connected to their learning communities. First, we need to make the invisible visible—to unveil the hidden curriculum. And more important, we need to encourage students and colleagues to question the legitimacy of the hidden curriculum itself.

I was a student who would have benefited from strong academic mentoring. I did not know what I did not know. I was subject to an establishment that did not value what I *did* know: my resiliency, my outspokenness, and my other strengths.

Recommendations for My Fellow Teachers

Numerous educators, scholars, and activists support the idea that schools have a responsibility to help students acquire the cultural capital and social capital they need to achieve academic success (Arriaza, 2003; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Henningsen, Valde, Russell, & Russell, 2011; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Smith, 2013). Many schools do an adequate job of sharing academic requirements and policies with all students, including those who are poor. The best schools provide an instructional curriculum in which students see themselves and in which students learn not just from teachers but also from adults and activists from the local community. Students in these schools feel valued for their ideas, attitudes, and skills.

Unfortunately too few schools prepare their students to understand and navigate the hidden curriculum. They rarely provide poor youth with the connections and resources to which wealthier students have access simply because they were born with money.

Starting where we are and on the basis of my lived experiences, teaching, and research, I offer the following recommendations for mitigating these disparities.

1. Elementary and secondary administrators have a responsibility to become cognizant of the hidden curriculum and to help teachers learn to identify it and understand its implications. Time and resources should be allocated not only to learning the concept but also to helping students become aware of it and how it operates.

2. We should incorporate into our teaching the assets low-income students bring to school. If poor students' resilience, flexibility, and persistence toward a goal is affirmed and integrated into the school culture, students would not drop out at the rate they do.
3. One approach to reducing structural inequality in schools is to create an activist mentoring culture in which educators model the practice of questioning and challenging the status quo. While mentors work to bolster students' academic skills, they also can be role models of activism and hope in their communities. Teachers could learn from the mentors as well, developing collaborative relationships with them. They could develop creative role-playing exercises, allowing students to develop the ability to feel comfortable in situations where they previously have been uncomfortable. Spoken-word poetry, neighborhood projects, and even political advocacy can be ways to build confidence and inspire hope for justice and real change.
4. Parents have to be an integral part of the mentoring process. They can reinforce the skills students learn at school and provide important information to teachers about the strengths of their sons and daughters. For their part teachers can help parents to help their children access scholarships and funding for summer programs and other opportunities many do not know about because they have been left out of the information loop.

In conclusion, if we do not intentionally unveil the hidden advantages that middle-class and upper-class students have over their low-income peers, we run the risk of indirectly reinforcing these inequalities in our classrooms. Many of us enter the teaching profession to challenge the status quo. Then we get swept up in rules and mandates and procedures, and we lose sight of why we went down this road in the first place. It takes courage to go on our own in a system that perpetuates itself at the expense of poor students. But not challenging this, not aligning ourselves with the strengths of the communities and neighborhoods from where our students come, is going back on our own moral center. It is, in the end, a civic responsibility to ensure that all students have opportunities to imagine lives of great hope.

Notes

1. The names of all the students and teachers are pseudonyms.
2. I provide more detailed research on the hidden curriculum, cultural capital, social capital, and mentoring process in my book *Mentoring At-Risk Students Through the Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

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