

Implicit and Explicit Education through School Curriculum and Society

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Abstract

In both workplaces and classrooms, people of diverse backgrounds interact with one another on a frequent basis. Each person is a member of any number of diverse groups, including those related to race, gender, and social class. While diversity is celebrated in theory, I argue that our society is not sensitive to, appreciative of, or genuinely interested in learning about the differences each individual possesses. From the texts students read in class to the commercials they watch on television, our children constantly receive implicit messages about people who are like them in some way to gain lessons about life. In this paper, I explore some of the discrepancies between the implicit and explicit messages children receive and explore how to reconcile these messages.

Keywords: diversity, gender, race, sexuality, culture, language, education

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The purposes and effectiveness of public education have been debated for centuries. When people engage in this conversation, they usually think in the traditional sense of the word and imagine schools, teachers, students, and desks. What is often overlooked is the fact that children, teenagers, and even adults are always students of life. They learn through their interactions with others and through the images and texts they are presented with on a daily basis both explicitly and implicitly. Even when information is not explicitly stated, students pick up on hidden meanings and unspoken truths that they struggle to apply to their own lives. Therefore, we will be unable to improve schools without improving the broader context of society, in which people are a) sensitive to, b) appreciative of, and c) genuinely interested in learning about the differences each individual possesses.

Du Bois stated that “It is difficult to think of anything more important for the development of a people than proper training for their children” (Sundquist, 1996, p. 426). The first word that stands out to me in this quote is training. He uses this word in lieu of the word education. When I began to speculate over why he chose this word, I thought about the phrase “home training”. This is what people refer to as the responsibility of one’s caregivers to teach right from wrong, proper etiquette, etc. I believe Du Bois’s use of this word allows one to add to that list the responsibility to teach children about a) their culture, b) their language(s), c) their ancestors’ struggles, d) their beliefs and e) their traditions. This responsibility was clearly accepted by Ivan M. Ivan, tribal chief of the Akiak regional community when he stated

“our home and dream is to teacher our children about our history, culture and language, and to instill in them the word called “hope”. If they have that in their heart they’re going to survive any kind of impact no matter what it is” (US Department of Education, 2010, p. 12).

Commitment to fulfilling this responsibility is why Du Bois called for a separate school for black people in which “children are . . . trained by teachers of their own race, who know what it means to be black” (Sundquist, 1996, p. 430).

One may argue that this mindset is no longer necessary, that our society has grown and evolved so much; after all, we have a Black president. I submit, however, that it is still necessary to have similar conversations and present similar arguments in the present day. For example, in a report on the state of American Indian education, Everett Chavez, governor of the Pueblo of Kewa was quoted as saying “If we’re going to be in control of our destiny, we have to be in control of our education” (US Department of Education, 2010, p. 8). This is just one of many groups today who do not feel that others are sensitive to, appreciative of, and/or genuinely interested in learning about their cultures and those things that are important to them and are therefore in danger of losing what makes them unique.

Before exploring some of those other groups, let us revisit the first Du Bois quote I used. I noticed within the quote that Du Bois does not use the term race; instead, he uses the term people. It is important to note that this term could be used to refer to any group who shares commonalities and is not exclusive to those of the same race. The term people is broad enough that it could be used to refer to those who share a) a culture, b) a sexual orientation, c) a language, d) a belief, e) a religion, f) an economic status, or even g) a gender. No matter the label of the group, their beliefs, the pride they possess in a) their accomplishments, b) their language(s), and c) other nuances specific to them will die out without being passed from generation to generation. Children are the vehicles through which these things continue, so Du Bois makes a valid point in saying that people need to develop and grow by training their children properly. Within this quote, he does not make mention of the curriculum as the key component; again, he speaks of the training. The current state of public education leaves many peoples worried about how their cultures will survive. I will discuss many of these groups of people throughout this text. I will discuss how the children of these people receive both implicit and explicit education through school curriculum and training through home life, as well as social and mainstream media. I will also discuss the effects of this instruction.

I will begin with a people who currently struggles to find acceptance in society, a people who experiences widespread prejudice and discrimination even among other groups who have been victim to this type of treatment, a people that is often vilified for their deviant behavior; though, they themselves are often victims of violence and hate in the name of morality- those who belong to the gay and lesbian community. Discrimination against gay and lesbian students and their culture even extends to negative recourse against teachers who attempt to explore the issues that pertain to them. Consider that “a third of teachers report that they fear adverse community reaction if they address sexuality; consequently, many avoid such discussions” (Klein, Markowitz, Puchner, & Anderson, 2011, p. 291). Or consider that “non-health teachers may feel justified or even pressured to avoid discussions of sexuality, as it is not their job” (Klein et al. p. 288).

The previous quote points out the questionable notion that there are things teachers are not responsible for teaching. Dewey maintained that the purpose of public education was to prepare a child to interact within society. According to Dewey (1897, article 1, para 6), “to prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities.” It is important to note that like Du Bois, Dewey uses the word train. Another word that sticks out is the word capacities. Not only does this refer to a student’s brain, but the term is broad enough to include a student’s body. If one adopts Dewey’s philosophy, it becomes imperative for teachers to discuss not only “acceptable topics”, but also taboo issues like those related to a) gender, b) sex, and c) sexuality. After all, “failure to provide lesbian/ gay-sensitive information would effectively shut out a significant minority of young people at elevated risk from the benefits of sexuality education” (Collins, Alagiri, Summers, & Morin, 2002, p. 11).

Though most classrooms will not engage in texts with openly gay characters or those who are comfortable and accepting of their own sexuality, students will make inferences regarding their sexual identities through the characters they do encounter. In a study of how popular children’s books are used within middle school classrooms, Klein, Markowitz, Puchner, and Anderson (2011, p. 297) noticed that “if a character in a text is not romantically interested in another sex, he or she is assumed to be heterosexual, but just too young.” This, then, reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is what is normal and right and that anyone who feels otherwise is not normal or even wrong. For,

“if students have no reasonable context for them . . . sexual themes and issues of sexuality . . . there . . . texts explore, they will attempt to understand the concepts based on what they hear through gossip and conjecture” (Klein et al., 2011, p. 289).

I appreciate the fact that the authors used the term conjecture, implying that children will use guesses or incomplete evidence to come to their conclusions, sometimes in spite of what they may feel or have been taught. There has to be no statistical evidence or other hard data for children to accept something as true because they are so impressionable.

This is a very dangerous thought because children are not knowledgeable enough about a) birth control, b) disease prevention, or c) definitions of sexual assault and rape to be able to make informed decisions that will keep them safe physically and emotionally and prevent far-reaching societal concerns such as the spread of the HIV/ Aids epidemic or high rates of teen pregnancy.

This is why the debate of abstinence-only versus comprehensive sex education programs will continue to be relevant. Young adults need to be informed about the risks they expose themselves to when they engage in the act of sex. They also need to be able to consider the perspective of someone who does not share the same sexual preference they do to minimize some of the anxiety that arises during these interactions. Neither of these goals can be accomplished by pretending that adolescents do not engage in sex and do not have any questions about it, which are guiding principles of abstinence-only programs. I question just how comprehensive school sex education programs should be; while students do not need to be taught about things like sexual positions, there does need to be some medium through which they can ask questions without feeling embarrassed or like they are doing something wrong. Since it is often said that people “fear what they don’t know”, it becomes essential that students be exposed to unbiased sex education both inside and outside their classrooms. Otherwise, the people of the gay and lesbian culture will continue to be ostracized and surrounded by those who are a) insensitive to, b) unappreciative of, and c) genuinely disinterested in learning about their differences.

While students may not receive much explicit instruction in school related to sex and/ or sexuality, there is no shortage of openly gay celebrities and characters represented in the media to provide information that is communicated implicitly. I offer the following examples. One of my favorite shows, *Modern Family*, has characters that speak to stereotypes of gay males. Mitchell and Cam are a couple in which one man acts more masculine and the other acts like a woman. What is really interesting to me is that the actor who plays the more feminine character of Cam is a straight man and is therefore showcasing what is widely accepted to embody a stereotype for a gay male who is flamboyant and “fabulous”. I also enjoyed the show *How I Met Your Mother*, in which an openly gay actor, Neil Patrick Harris, plays an extremely heterosexual male. No doubt, if this information has been shared with them, this is confusing to some young males who do not feel compelled to act like Cam or may assume that one needs to pretend to be attracted to women as the character Barney does. Perhaps, this confusion is why the metrosexual male came to be. He was embodied by the character Ken in the children’s movie *Toy Story 3*, a movie aimed at a young audience. This male character was interested in clothes and kept himself well-groomed- characteristics not usually attributed to a man.

Of course, sexuality issues are very closely related to gender issues, which brings me to the second people I wish to discuss- those of each gender. While I do know that celebrities including Ellen Degeneres and Rosie O’Donnell are openly gay women, I could not think of any recent female television or movie characters who are openly gay. Female characters continue to be widely represented as attracted to men and dedicated to making themselves more desirable to men. Consider the number of a) clothing, b) perfume, c) shampoo, and d) makeup commercials that air during any given commercial break or the number of articles and ads related to these topics in girls’ magazines. These advertisements send the implicit messages that girls are not beautiful just as they are or that true beauty has to be bought and worn or applied and is necessary to “get the guy.”

In *The Sexuality Curriculum and Youth Culture*, the authors state that “girls learn through schooling what lies ahead for them as women. They learn to feel “fat, dirty, ugly, objectified or ashamed of their bodies” (Carlson & Roseboro, 2011, p, 9). While this statement does not seem properly reinforced with the use of examples immediately following the quote within the article, such evidence does exist to accomplish this. For example, in the study surrounding children’s literature I mentioned previously, Klein et al. (2011) provide a section on the common theme of “the male gaze”. In this section, they explore the idea that “those who are not attractive are deemed unworthy of male attention” by providing quotes from the literature such as the “ongoing joke throughout *A Long Way from Chicago* [when] Grandma’s life-long enemy, Effie Wilcox, is presented as an ugly woman who never married” (Klein et al., p. 299). Those authors also explore the idea that “another implicit message in the texts is that . . . heterosexual romance is presented as more important to female identity than to male identity” (p. 299).

Young girls are not the only ones susceptible to these disheartening messages about their looks and the need to be attractive. When Jennifer Lopez was in the beginning stages of her entertainment career, she had dark, curly locks. Now, her hair is straight and honey blonde. I also recall that when Mariah Carey was a new artist, she had long, brown wavy hair. Like Jennifer Lopez- who now goes by the name, J. Lo instead of Lopez- Mariah Carey has long, straight, light-colored hair. In a different, but related light, I present celebrities like Starr Jones and Jennifer Hudson, who have lost a lot of weight. I cannot help but think that these women have all received implicit instruction in what it means to be beautiful based on what they have seen as acceptable in their respective careers and personal experiences.

If people with a) fame, b) adoring fans, c) personal trainers, and d) more money than most people can ever expect to receive in their lifetimes have insecurities about the way they look and are viewed by others, imagine how a young girl in a classroom or cafeteria must feel when she sees within the building and within the texts she reads the divide between the pretty and the ugly girls, the popular and unpopular girls, the skinny and the not-so-skinny girls.

“If we accept that schools have the imperative to “teach students the . . . values of tolerance, acceptance, decency, . . . gender equity . . .”, then teachers have the imperative to examine, discuss, expand or debunk messages about sexuality [or beauty] found in the texts they assign” (Klein et al, 2011, p. 300).

There are some instances in which celebrities attempt to communicate to young women that they “rock” (a special on BET), they are beautiful (Christina Aguilera), or that they are not defined by their hair (India Arie). These positive messages are often drowned out by more popular messages, like all of the commercials expressing the need for a) anti-aging creams, b) Pro-Active skin cream, and c) Weight Watchers in order for one to be happy with herself. Students should be engaged in conversations in which they learn to value who they are and what they look like and to celebrate those differences. Although these conversations should take place, I do argue that they should not be overshadowed by more substantive conversations in which girls are encouraged to make contributions to the world other than being a pretty face.

Girls are not the only ones who may have difficulty learning about themselves and what is expected of them. Boys have their own set of issues, both inside and outside of the classroom. Boys a) have higher dropout rates, b) earn lower scores on standardized tests, and c) receive fewer college degrees than their female counterparts. Many of the toys, games, and other media-perpetuated role models boys are exposed to are a) violent, b) aggressive, and c) powerful. Some examples of this include superhero action figures and video games like Call of Duty. These males have physical goals to achieve rather than academic or cognitive ones. Even in school curriculum, males are represented as dominant and physically superior. For example, when discussing tall tales, are not Paul Bunyan and John Henry the most commonly studied? In Social Studies, a lot of the curriculum related to this country is about men taking land from others, engaging in wars, and owning slaves. For those that are not athletic or athletic or have no desire to be aggressive, they are often bullied or ostracized for being “nerds” or may even have their sexuality questioned.

It is no wonder that many young males do not see reason to place much emphasis on showing off and/ or improving their intelligence. Perhaps, this disconnect is why boys are so overrepresented in the special education department. There may not necessarily be an inability to perform at the appropriate level, rather than the inability to care about or put effort into performing at the appropriate level. Or perhaps, “when these children have trouble learning, it is too frequently assumed that it’s only because they are less intelligent” (Delpit, 2012, p. 95), rather than unmotivated. Once these assumptions have been made by the adults in the children’s lives and their low expectations have been communicated- rather explicitly or implicitly- students are likely to live up to those expectations and their diagnoses.

The problem of boys being overrepresented in special education classes intersects with the issue of class and issues related to other peoples, i.e. those who belong to the same class or SES, those with special needs diagnoses, and those of the same culture and/ or race.

“Children . . . from middle-class families who are classified as learning disabled are often told that they are intelligent but that there’s a part of their brain that works differently . . . By contrast, the . . . message to many poor African American children . . . is that they are unable to learn, are intrinsically less intelligent, and must be isolated” (Delpit, 2012, p. 95).

Again, if it is generally accepted that these children cannot do better, that leaves them with no motivation to try to do better, leaving society without the contributions of many competent workers and thinkers.

“There . . . appears to be consistent evidence of overrepresentation of boys in school disciplinary sanctions” (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000, p. 4). Black males are most often on the receiving end of these sanctions. “When . . . African American students, accustomed to a more active, participatory pattern (“call-response”), demonstrate their engagement by providing comments and reactions, teachers may interpret such behavior as rude and disruptive” (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004, p. 26). On a related note, Skiba et al., 2000, p. 13) reported that “white students were significantly more likely . . . to be referred . . . for smoking, leaving without permission, vandalism, and obscene language.

Black students were more likely to be referred for disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering". When I looked at the infractions of the black students, I noticed that their actions were more subjective, open to interpretation than those of the white students. A student leaving a classroom without permission is the same infraction from one classroom to the next. In contrast, what one teacher may consider "excessive noise", another may consider evidence that a student is actively participating.

Consider also that a threat does not have to be communicated in order for someone to feel threatened. I submit as an example the recently publicized case between Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. Simply by nature of being a young, black male in a decent neighborhood, he was considered "suspicious". This begs the question, are black children's actions misunderstood for being more negative than they are truly intended to be? I propose that in this type of situation, it should not matter to what group a child belongs for them to be treated as respected and valued members of their classrooms. For, "sometimes personality, temperament, and social competence are more important than academic abilities in how teachers react to students . . ." (Gay, 2002, p. 615).

This brings me to the point that some people are not considered "good students" simply because of the way the education system has been set up and not through any fault or lack of preparation on their (or their parents') behalf. "None of the early school assessments look at what . . . children do know" (Delpit, 2012, p. 55); for, "'Do you know what I know?'" is the culturally charged question that is usually asked in our schools . . . the question that makes invisible the culture, the home, the knowledge of the young person in front of us" (Delpit, 2012, p. 200). Basic skills are considered to be those things deemed important by one group of people, but may not necessarily be important to another group. Imagine a student who from birth to school-age has lived in a part of the world in which it is always hot and sandals are usually worn. Is anyone at fault when the child moves here, enrolls in school, and cannot tie shoelaces? Of course, not, but unfortunately, "when they don't see evidence of what they believe to be "basic skills" schools frequently judge the students and their families, rather than the instruction as deficient" (Delpit, 2012, p. 55).

In the scenario of the child above, the school's instruction would not be considered deficient either. However, it is well-known that many schools located in urban neighborhoods of low socioeconomic status have "insufficient school funding; few if any advanced courses; too few qualified teachers; undemanding pedagogy; low academic achievement on the part of most of the students . . . and all-too-often, unchallenging academic content" (Anyon, 2005, p. 95). Then, these students are often blamed when they are not academically successful.

This has become a huge part of my reality recently. I now work in a consistently low-performing school in which most students performed behind their peers at other schools on district-wide Class Scape assessments but many received honor roll for the first quarter. This is a school where one teacher did not know that there is a difference between Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr., another teacher taught her students a lesson on geezers instead of geysers, and yet another teacher taught her students that the word snail has a short vowel sound. When students took standardized assessments, such as Class Scape and Reading 3D, and performed poorly, the teachers talked about what students did not know when they entered school, what they were not taught last year, and what their parents did/ do not work on with them at home. "Neither teachers blaming students for their own . . . incompetence, nor teachers expecting them to not measure up to other people's cultural standards is a valid foundation for effectively teaching ethnic diversity in regular or special education" (Gay, 2002, p. 615). Neither students nor teachers themselves can learn more about one another without being encouraged and empowered to ask the question *What do you know?* "This is the question that will allow us to begin, with . . . cultural sensitivity the right educational journey" (Delpit, 2012, p. 200). With a proper start on this educational journey in the classroom, society could benefit greatly outside the classroom.

Keeping in mind the list provided by Anyon, which includes insufficient funding and few qualified teachers, it is no wonder that schools attended by people of color often have poor reputations. This was an issue affecting both public and higher education institutions almost a hundred years ago when Du Bois wrote

"Howard, Fisk, and Atlanta are naturally unable to do the type and grade of graduate work which is done at Columbia, Chicago, and Harvard; but why attribute this to a defect in the Negro race, and not to the fact that the large white colleges have from one hundred to one thousand times the funds for equipment and research that Negro colleges can command?" (1935, p. 427)

There are many today who do not acknowledge the discrepancies that are well-documented and do not believe that the quality of education at an HBCU, an historically black college or university, is equivalent to that at any other institution. During Du Bois' time, he stated that

when the Negro public school system gets from half to one-tenth of the amount of money spent on white schools, and is often consequently poorly run and poorly taught, colored people tacitly if not openly join with white people in assuming that Negroes . . . cannot educate themselves, and that the very establishment of a Negro school means starting an inferior school. (Sundquist, 1996, p. 427)

He also states that "as long as a Negro student is ashamed to attend Fisk or Howard because these institutions are largely run by black folk, just so long the main problem of Negro education will not be segregation but self-knowledge and self-respect" (p. 426).

Obviously, there are societal consequences of low enrollment numbers and attendance rates of HBCUs or similar universities for people of other colors. There are also many instances in which people confirm Du Bois' fears about assumptions of inferior schools, like those who do not believe that candidates who have graduated from an HBCU are not as qualified and prepared for employment as their counterparts from other schools. This leaves the state of HBCUs and students who graduate from them with a dim future, though these institutions and these people are providing the training Du Bois mentioned using vehicles like band competitions and step show competitions.

I have spent a lot of time discussing the people of the black race. Of course, this sense of being discriminated against and/ or being misunderstood in the educational context applies to students of other race groups as well. "In 1989 Cummins concluded that minority students may be educationally disempowered in the same way that communities are disempowered within society" (Gritzmacher & Gritzmacher, 1995). This quote is similar to one from Anyon in which she says "attempting to fix inner-city schools without fixing the city in which they are embedded is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door" (Anyon, 2005). Both scholars acknowledge that in addition to attempts made to improve schools, the problem requires societal changes as well.

Consider the sentiment expressed by Tom Miller, Superintendent of Hannahville Indian School. He stated that "Captain Pratt used education to take away our language, culture, history. What we would like is for Obama to take education and use it to restore our language, culture and history" (US Dept. of Education, 2010, p. 11). This implies that it is the responsibility of the government to "fix" education by promoting cultural education and acceptance. Mr. Miller does not seem to consider that this responsibility could also spread to a much broader context. After all, with the capabilities of government entities like the FCC to control and regulate information communicated through media, "allowing native languages, cultures, and different traditions to perish through "nonassistance to endangered cultures" must henceforth be considered a basic violation of human rights" (Reyhner, 2009, p. 7). Although it may be hard to define what is meant by "endangered cultures", it is not difficult to admit that while we seemingly take pride in being "a melting pot", we do not see evidence of that melting pot in a) food advertisements, b) commercials with subtitles because they are in different language, or c) even on the radio where radio stations play music of all different cultures on the same channels. As we continue to provide separate channels like Univision and BET, we will continue to implicitly teach that it is not necessary to learn about others; for, they have their own "thing" and I have my own.

In spite of the many different people who live in our country, Tom Miller's quote hints at the concept of forcible cultural assimilation. Though that may sound like an act that should only be associated with early colonial times, this act still happens every day in public schools when students enter with the label "ESL". When a student entered my 5th grade classroom speaking only Arabic, the only resource I received was an English to Arabic dictionary. The student received an ESL teacher for 30 minutes a few hours a day. The point behind the lack of resources was not for my students or me to learn more about how to make the student comfortable or learn about his culture; the expectation was that the student would learn how to speak English and take the same EOG, written in English, as his classmates at the end of the school year.

The people of the ESL program and many students in general do not receive the explicit instruction on how to preserve their cultures and languages while also considering their audiences when they are completing assignments. They are not taught to temporarily adopt "the perspective of . . . "the little white ladies in Tallahassee!" (a reference to the assessors in the state's capital)" (Delpit, 2012, p. 141) for particular tasks.

If they were exposed to this type of instruction, that would make “the assessment of their writing not a question of right or wrong but of appropriateness for the potential assessors” (Delpit, 2012, p. 141). Instead students are left to question the correctness or acceptability of the language used by themselves, their families, and/or the people in their communities outside of the school building, because, as I mentioned earlier, students are impressionable children who will learn even what a teacher does not believe she is teaching. For example, “Western science methods of knowledge building that involve measuring, classifying, collecting, dissecting, and mapping everything in a material world are antithetical to a Hawaiian world view that understands humans and nature in a familial relationship” (Chinn, 2011, p. 77). Students are not taught to reconcile those differences but rather they are implicitly taught to abandon their families’ world views in order to be “successful” in this country. Chinn also states

“while democracy is an admirable form of government, too often in them majorities tyrannize minorities in a variety of ways from making them second class citizens with a second class education to forcing them through schooling to adopt the ways of the majority”. (Reyhner, 2009, p. 8)

I argue that there are so many differences in our society that there is no clear majority. We have different sexual preferences, and our knowledge about and exposure to sex education varies. People of many groups receive sometimes contradictory information, as is the case when members of the gay and lesbian community are abused in the name of what is right or when girls are encouraged to be proud of who they are while also being encouraged to change who they are by applying makeup. These mixed messages about what is expected of people make it difficult to know what is acceptable. We are all expected to speak the same language and only see commercials for “American” foods while saying that we celebrate our diversity. We are encouraged to share with one another and treat others the way we would like to be treated; yet, important policies “that would help [others of many groups are] . . . conspicuous by their absence” (Anyon, 2005, p. 7). Representatives from the Sealaska Heritage Institute said “All students, not just the Native students, benefit from a curriculum which addresses local culture, history and language” (US Department of Education, 2010, p. 12). While this is a true statement, we will never be able to improve the state of education without first improving the broader context of society, which is to include effective use of the media, in which people are a) sensitive to, b) appreciative of, and c) genuinely interested in learning about the differences each individual possesses through explicit exploration of these differences, not through the passive conjecture of our children.

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