HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

EDITED BY

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I write this chapter as a new academic year gets underway. Three weeks into the fall and I am still struggling to learn the names of the dozens of prospective teachers in my undergraduate, introductory course on urban education. I love teaching this course, perhaps because my attempts at troubling their assumptions and perspectives on what schools should and could look like often lead to my own awakenings.

We have spent the first few weeks developing several themes or “lenses” that we will revisit throughout the semester as we examine a range of ways that schools perpetuate social inequities. One such lens is that of the hidden curriculum, which was the topic of my class session just days ago. I began by dividing the chalkboard in half, asking the students to brainstorm: When does gender or sexual orientation come up in schools? That is, when do we see or learn something about gender or sexual orientation? Going around the room, I asked each student to share one instance, and I recorded their responses on either half of the board. The left side of the board was much fuller, and included such instances as: lining up for separate restrooms, less resources for girls’ sports teams, dress codes, calling on boys more often, encouraging boys to study science (and discouraging them from the arts), boy–girl couples at dances, name calling (like “fag”) and the failure of adults to intervene, permission forms for “mother or father,” more male figures in history textbooks. The right side was fleshed out only after some prompting by me: celebrating Women’s History Month, lessons on women writers, lessons on gender discrimination, lessons on family diversity, guest speakers on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues.

We then discussed differences between the two lists. The left list is longer. The left-hand items take place all the time while the right-hand items occur occasionally if at all. The left-hand items often reflect messages that we hear in popular culture or our communities about gender and sexual differences, while the right-hand items are often trying to challenge such messages. The left-hand items often go unobserved because they have become commonplace in schools and society, while the right-hand items are often the result of teachers intentionally trying to raise these issues.

Indeed, researchers have distinguished between these two categories, the right side being the formal or official curriculum (what we are intentionally teaching), the left side, the hidden curriculum (what we teach indirectly, unintentionally, and often, unknowingly). The hidden curriculum is often in stark contrast to the formal curriculum, resulting in a form of education that is permeated with multiple and contradictory teachings. Because the hidden curriculum is more commonplace and pervasive, because it echoes the messages that students hear from outside of schools, because it rarely goes challenged, and because it is more what we actually do versus what we say that we should do, it arguably has more educational significance than the formal curriculum. This helps us to see why the occasional lectures about, say, the importance of treating girls in the same
ways that we treat boys will mean little if students observe that the teacher calls on boys to move tables and girls to sweep, or that the textbooks highlight men in history much more than women. Challenging gender and sexual bias, in other words, requires more than teaching lessons about gender and sexual differences—it also requires addressing the many hidden ways that such lessons already occur.

I pointed out several key issues that are raised by this activity. First, every school and every classroom will have a unique set of hidden lessons, and no school or classroom is without them. Even in our course, taught by someone who thinks a lot about hidden curriculums, there will likely be messages that students are learning that I did not intend or even do not support. Second, in a school that is teaching multiple and contradictory messages, different students will likely “learn” very different things. We brainstormed a number of factors that influence what and how students learn: what they learned from their parents and the media; what they are interested in or have come to value; how they feel about the teacher; and whether they were even paying attention at any given moment. The identities, life experiences, learning styles, and past learnings all create unique “lenses” through which students make sense of the world around them, and because we all have different lenses, we should expect that we will learn and react to lessons in unpredictable, unique ways.

As we debriefed this activity, my students voiced a range of responses. They spoke, for example, of the presumption that schools should focus on the “academic” subjects and remain neutral or silent on such social, controversial issues as gender bias and sexual orientation. Such a presumption is problematic when we see that schools can never be neutral on such issues, given the myriad and pervasive ways in which such issues arise. Students also spoke of the importance of doing an activity like this with teachers as a way to raise awareness of the many ways that schools can indirectly teach about gender and sexual orientation. They shared memories of teachers claiming that bias did not exist in their schools because they did not see it manifest in obvious ways, or worse yet, teachers remaining silent in the face of such instances. Silence can be instructive, as when adult silence around antigay name-calling indirectly teaches that such action is acceptable in schools.

But where my students seemed troubled was in their questions about the implications of this activity, particularly regarding the multiple lessons coming from schools and the multiple “lenses” being used by students. Can teachers ever be aware of all of the hidden lessons in their school? Does the hidden curriculum make the formal, intentional lessons on bias pointless? If students are all using unique “lenses,” how do we ensure that they are learning what we want them to learn?

I was reminded of a lesson I once taught to prospective teachers several years ago. As is commonly the case in workshops for teachers on homophobia in schools, I centered my workshop on a litany of statistics and quotations that reflected the many challenges experienced by LGBT youth, particularly regarding high rates of bullying and harassment, alcohol and other drug use, family tensions and homelessness, even depression and suicide. Such statistics provoked in me deep sympathy and anger, and I assumed that others would respond similarly and with a commitment to act. But after reading through the statistics, one person’s response revealed the problem with my assumption. She asked how it was that people have responded to these statistics in other situations where I have shared them. Although she personally felt disturbed and motivated to address these problems, she said that she could imagine someone saying, “See, I always felt there was something wrong with being homosexual, and here’s the proof—look at all the problems they experience.”
Kevin K. Kumashiro

The lenses that students bring to the classroom can lead them to respond to any lesson in multiple, unpredictable ways, which means that information meant to challenge bias can actually serve to reinforce that bias, as was the case in this student’s imagined response. I shared this experience with my students as an illustration of how the students’ lenses can indeed take lessons in counterproductive directions. As we explored alternative ways of teaching that lesson, at least three considerations emerged.

First, there was the development of a shared lens. The notion that multiple lenses can lead students to “learn” in ways that directly contradict the goals of the lesson suggest that teachers must find ways to help students to develop alternative lenses, particularly shared or common lenses that allow the various individuals in the classroom to hear one another through common language and shared perspectives. When teachers speak of “scaffolding” their lessons, or sequencing their lessons “progressively,” they are, in a sense, altering their students’ lenses such that they respond to their lessons in productive ways. Were I to reteach my lesson with the litany of statistics, it would be important to engage in pre- or postactivities that invite students to “read” those statistics in antipressive ways and not in ways that merely reinforce existing homophobia.

Of course, teaching should not consist merely of teachers insisting that everyone end up in the same place, which means that the development of shared lenses cannot be the only goal. This leads to the second consideration, the encouragement of taking unbeat paths. Yes, it was a problem that I had not anticipated the many ways that students could have responded to the statistics. But it is equally problematic for me now to expect that all students “should” respond in only certain ways, namely, in ways that I have already determined to be the better ones. We often define teaching as a demand to conform: we say where we want students to end up (the objectives), we plan a lesson to get them there (the activities), and then we assess whether or not they got there, and if they did, we conclude that our teaching was effective, and their learning, accomplished. But if we acknowledge that any lens is partial and has both strengths and weaknesses, including the lenses of the teachers, then such a demand to conform is problematic. In fact, such a demand is what is commonly criticized about some forms of multicultural education, as when arguing that we are simply replacing one perspective (the hegemonic one) with another (the politically correct one). Learning must involve going where neither the student nor the teacher could have foretold and, as a class, taking the unbeaten path.

But this is not to say that every way of reading is equally antipressive, which leads to the third consideration, the paradoxes of teaching and learning. Some ways of reading support and perpetuate bias, and other ways of reading explicitly challenge bias. A fundamental goal for teachers, then, should be neither to insist on learning the one “best” lens, nor to value all lenses equally. Rather, the goal should be to articulate a variety of lenses and examine what each one makes possible and impossible. Students might ask, How does this lens reinforce stereotypes or challenge them? What does this lens highlight, and what does this lens make difficult to see? What questions does this lens invite us to ask, which emotions does this lens touch, and on whom does this lens call to act?

Such questions make teaching and learning paradoxical precisely because they call into question the very things being taught and learned. As teachers, we often have a difficult time acknowledging the assumptions, gaps, and political implications of our own teaching, and an even harder time making such partialities a central part of our lesson. Yet, perhaps it is precisely when students ask such critical questions about our teaching that they think critically about what they are learning, how they are learning it, and how any learning, even the “antioppressive” ones, cannot help but be partial and political.

Often, as I teach prospective teachers, I confront a strong desire for very concrete strategies to address homophobia in schools, or as they often put it, “What do I do when
someone says ‘fag?’” Such a demand is understandable—teaching is not easy, and we need tools to make antioppressive teaching doable. Furthermore, asking students to raise critical questions about the necessarily partial and political nature of what and how they are learning requires a level of vulnerability and unpredictability for which we as educators have rarely been prepared. But perhaps the desire for certainty and control is what has prevented us from imagining and engaging in ways of teaching that can help us to address the contradictions inherent in antioppressive change. Ironically, by acknowledging the problems with trying to control what and how students learn, and by illustrating what it could mean to center the gaps in our own teaching, my students and I seemed to feel less stressful about the challenges of antioppressive teaching, and more hopeful in our abilities to enact it in our classrooms. With these questions lingering, we ended the class session, and I left with the hope that such work has only just begun in the classrooms of these future teachers and in my own.