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Developing a Critical Awareness of the Hidden Curriculum through Media Literacy

RAYMOND A. HORN, JR.

There are many definitions and types of curriculum; however, the hidden curriculum is one of the most important and receives very little attention. Hidden curriculum is a broad category that includes all of the unrecognized and sometimes unintended knowledge, values, and beliefs that are part of the learning process in schools and classrooms. One of the most significant sources of hidden curriculum is the media.

In our market-driven information society, educators, students, and parents live in a media-saturated environment and bring the knowledge, values, and beliefs of media representations into the school environment. Besides encountering commercial efforts such as Channel One inside the classroom, students and educators are affected by both the easily recognizable and the cleverly hidden media messages that they encounter outside of the school. These media representations mediate and inform the interactions between educators and students, as well as the students' construction of meaning, as they engage each other and the formal school curriculum. In addition, parents' and the general public's attitudes and opinions about educators, schools, and students are also affected by these media representations. Unfortunately, educators are generally unaware of the hidden curriculum of the media and its effect on schools and education. As the focus on curriculum and instruction content and student test achievement intensifies, the effects of the hidden curriculum become even harder to discern.

Why should educators become critically aware of the hidden curriculum generated by the media? In a course that I teach as part of an education master's degree program at Pennsylvania State Harrisburg, teachers answer

this question as they simultaneously develop media literacy skills and become aware of the implications of the hidden curriculum on their own pedagogy and on society in general. The critical awareness and media literacy activities used in this course can be transposed to other professional development opportunities or to personal investigations into the hidden curriculum taught by the media. To demonstrate the possibilities and potential benefits of exploring these topics in an education course, following are some basic activities I've used in the classroom, along with some of my students' evolving answers to the question of why the hidden curriculum of media matters to educators.

The Foundations of Critical Awareness and Media Literacy

Becoming aware of the hidden curriculum and its implications for education requires the ongoing development of a critical vocabulary and the acquisition of categorical criteria that can be used to move from a superficial understanding of media representations to the ability to uncover the hidden meanings and implications of those representations. Critical vocabulary is a technical vocabulary involving words like *hegemony*, *hierarchy*, *cultural capital*, *oppression*, *privilege*, *resistance*, *marginalization*, *social reproduction*, *praxis*, *constructed consciousness*, *false consciousness*, and *critical consciousness*. However, this vocabulary generally deals with power relationships, personal and collective identity, and personal and collective efficacy. The importance of developing this kind of vocabulary lies in the fact that media representations of people and places also involve power, identity, and efficacy. To understand the

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effects of the media-driven hidden curriculum necessitates an understanding of the media messages about power (i.e., who has it, who doesn't, how to get it), identity (i.e., who you are, where you fit in, how to fit in), and efficacy (i.e., who's effective in achieving goals, what you need to do to achieve your goals).

Organizing criteria into categories that can facilitate one's inquiry into the hidden curriculum is another awareness-enhancing technique. Categories can range from school-specific foci such as school, teacher, administrator, and student effectiveness, to general foci such as race, gender, social class, ethnicity, lifestyle, sexual preference, and body image. Two additional categories—caring and justice—can lead to a deeper understanding of media representations. When media representations are analyzed according to these criteria with the use of a critical vocabulary, the hidden messages attached to the representations become clear. Examples of this process are evident in the following media literacy activities used in the curriculum foundation course in one master's degree program.

The Process of Critical Awareness

The core activities in this process of becoming critically aware include the development of a critical vocabulary and knowledge base; an introduction to the corporate construction of childhood; a critical critique of movie representations about educators, students, and schools; and teacher presentations of their critical interrogation of the hidden curriculum of selected cultural artifacts. The first core activity is based on *Finding Freedom in the Classroom: A Practical Introduction to Critical Theory* (Hinchey 1998). Hinchey provides common educational and personal examples of the previously listed critical vocabulary that resonate with the teachers' experience. Besides acquiring a critical vocabulary and an understanding of the categorical criteria, the teachers emotionally connect with Hinchey's examples, which often prompt intense agreement or disagreement. This combination of the intellectual and the emotional builds a foundation for an effective critical interrogation of media representations.

Because American children and young adults represent a bountiful market for corporate interests, they are intensely targeted through the media. Movies, music, books, magazines, newspapers, television, the Internet, billboards, and other advertising media bombard this market group with messages encouraging them to buy certain products and to believe certain ideas. Numerous individuals have argued that this corporate bombardment is at least as effective, if not more so, in acculturating children and young adults than the public schools. Generally, in the courses I have taught, I have found that teachers have a superficial knowledge of this corporate assault but do not understand its critical implications. To facilitate a deeper understanding,

teachers read excerpts from *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood* (Steinberg and Kincheloe 1997). This source examines the hidden curriculum attached to child-oriented movies (i.e., Disney movies, the *Home Alone* movies), professional wrestling, toys (i.e., Barbie, American Girls), children's television shows, video games, children's magazines, and corporate marketing geared to children by companies such as McDonald's.

After students develop a critical vocabulary and a knowledge base about the hidden curriculum found in media, I provide a critique of how movies represent educators, students, and schools. Students view and critique excerpts from movies such as *187*, *Lean on Me*, *The Substitute*, *Teachers*, *High School*, and others. In this activity, the critical vocabulary and categorical criteria are used to go beyond the surface messages to uncover the representations that are repetitively made about schools, educators, and students. The teachers in the class uncover the representations and compare them to their own intellectual and emotional experience or their lack of experience with the celluloid representations of people and situations in these educational contexts. The technical construction of the movies is also analyzed to understand how the representations become powerfully real to the viewer and are designed to elicit visceral reactions.

This activity is supported with readings from *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers and Teaching in the Movies* (Dalton 1999), a published review of *187* (Fassett and Warren 1999), and an article on the influence of movies such as *Forrest Gump* on the public's understanding of the Vietnam War (Wineburg, Mosborg, and Porat 2000). In this activity, teachers discover patterns of representations about teachers, administrators, school effectiveness, and different kinds of students that are inaccurate and promote negative stereotypes.

These core activities lead to a culminating course activity in which the teachers present their own critical interrogation of the hidden curriculum of selected cultural artifacts. Using a critical vocabulary, the categorical criteria, and the knowledge base gained from the prior activities, they scrutinize a cultural artifact to uncover the artifact's hidden curriculum and the implications of that curriculum for their students, their schools, and themselves as professionals. Examples of artifacts selected by teachers include action figures and other toys; popular musicians ranging from Britney Spears to Marilyn Manson; educational trade books; book series such as *Harry Potter* and the *American Girls*; television shows such as *Dora the Explorer*, *Trading Spaces*, *Boston Public*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Fear Factor*, and *The Simpsons*; magazines and magazine advertisements from sources including *Victoria's Secret*, *Abercrombie and Fitch*, and *Cosmopolitan*; movies such as *White Man's Burden* and

Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory; television commercials dealing with cars, beer, and credit cards; video games; and toy stores. Invariably, the outcome of this analysis is identification of knowledge, values, and beliefs that are interpreted as unhealthy and in some way detrimental to students, educators, and schools. In some cases, teachers make professional and personal decisions to take action to offset these representations.

The Challenges of Critical Awareness

Why should educators become critically aware of the hidden curriculum generated by the media? After engaging in these media literacy activities, the teachers find numerous answers to this question. Some are motivated by their personal concern for their own children, others by their professional concern for their students. In addition, many teachers are concerned about the erroneous perceptions of their profession that are propagated by special interests through the media. All of their concerns are based on their newly acquired critical awareness. However, critical awareness through media literacy provides its own challenges.

One challenge relates to the awareness that public opinion about education is not solely based on the public's personal experience with their schools and educators. As students come to realize, the public's perception of education is greatly influenced by media representations of education. For instance, individuals who live in a predominately white, middle-class suburban area and have had little contact with the poor, minorities, or urban environments have little personal experience to inform their perceptions about poor, predominately minority urban schools. What fills this information gap? The reality is that the individuals' lack of experience is replaced by what they see in movies and television, what they read in newspapers and magazines, and what they hear in music. Without the critical awareness fostered by media literacy, these individuals are susceptible to adopt the opinions represented in the media.

If certain perceptions are repetitively presented, the repetition of the message validates the message. Therefore, the challenge to the educator is to continuously critique media messages and to seek out the rest of the context and the deeper patterns of behavior that were not provided by the media. One aspect of critical awareness is the understanding that only part of the story is provided by the media. Whether the phenomenon targeted by the media is school effectiveness, school violence, or teacher professionalism, only the part of the context that supports the purposes of the media are provided to the viewer/reader/listener. This incomplete context denies the inherent contextual

complexity and local uniqueness of all situations. The challenge to the critically aware individual is to go beyond the media's use of emotion, textual incompleteness, repetition and stereotypes, and attain a more complex understanding of the situation in question.

Another challenge is to understand the purposes that drive media—profit and ideology. Media ethics are based on the profit motive. Decisions that affect people and places are based on what techniques and messages will sell the product. In addition, media is used to promote certain political, moral, and cultural values and beliefs. This promotion of specific values increases in reality as whole industries come under the control of a few corporate conglomerates. The challenge for critically aware individuals is to constantly critique media representations for these purposes.

A final challenge is that media literacy is complicating, because a critically aware individual now understands that things are "not that simple." Because of this awareness of complexity, more work is required to uncover the hidden curriculum attached to media representations. It is also complicating because critically aware individuals cannot confront hidden values and beliefs without confronting their own values and beliefs. Any analysis of media representations requires an analysis of one's own beliefs and actions. The final complication surfaces along with awareness—the question of whether one should take action, and if so, how. This is a moral and ethical decision about advocating for one's students, profession, or self. Depending on the individual's position, this can be more than complicating in that it may require some degree of sacrifice.

However, critical awareness through media literacy can be liberating. Through awareness, choice becomes a possibility. Through awareness, individuals can be stronger and more effective advocates for themselves and others. Through awareness and media literacy, critically informed decisions can be made about the curriculum that is attached to all media representations.

Key words: media literacy, hidden curriculum, critical awareness, communication

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