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COMPARING SUBURBAN SCHOOL CULTURE IN METROPOLITAN HARTFORD:

HOW DOES THE FORMAL AND HIDDEN CURRICULUM VARY ACROSS TWO HIGH SCHOOLS?

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INTRODUCTION

When educators discuss schools as an institution of learning, focus is primarily placed on the "formal curriculum", courses of study offered by schools to students as approved by school boards and listed in school documents. However what may be more important in shaping the learning process of students and the culture of the school is the "hidden curriculum", unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the administrators and faculty. (ERIC) For educators to remain productive in shaping school policy, they must become more aware of the way hidden curriculum presents itself in the school setting. Exploring facets of culture has been historically a sociological discipline, however for schools to move forward educators must call into question all aspects of schooling and examine them with a critical mind.

Formal curriculum can be observed through school course documents and course catalogs. While hidden curriculum refers to the way the learning process is organized, it can be consciously and unconsciously transmitted. For example, the physical layout of a school building or the way a teacher organizes their classroom. Unconscious transmission can be observed through how teachers interpret behavior or expectations of student work processes in the classroom. A result of difference of staff aspirations and

expectations for their students across school districts may create a difference in the way students learn and construct educational decisions. What is viewed as obvious or plain may in fact be the most complex or elusive assertion to formulate. One person's observation or interpretation may be the total opposite of another's. In fact what is present in one setting may not be present in the other. Public Schools in the United States in theory are to provide each student with an equal education and an equal opportunity to pursue and fulfill objectives in life. However, with the disparity in test scores across the nation and implementation if policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act, it is apparent that schools in the United States are not standardized across the nation.

In comparing schools in the United States the first distinction that can be drawn is whether it is a suburban, urban or rural district. With the construction of interstate highways in the late 1950's and early 1960's suburban towns began to grow with the areas most affluent citizens. Today, suburban schools often display the greatest achievement academically. Suburban schools allegedly promote and exemplify the educational and social values that sustain the American ideal. Since suburban schools lead the list of achieving schools, it would be interesting to see if they sustain the same ideals. This project compares formal curriculum and most importantly makes visible the often unstated part of the culture of school life in two suburban high schools. For this reason it is important to ask, how does formal and hidden curriculum vary across two Metropolitan Hartford high schools? This project reports, regarding the formal curriculum, the two schools offer virtually the same content. However their curricular tracks are not the same. School As' tracks are college and non-college orientated, while School B offers non-college tracks. Regarding the hidden curriculum, School As' staff

emphasizes students' creative thought and independence. While School Bs' staff emphasizes teachers' authority and student discipline and order.

SIGNIFICANCE

In reviewing past literature on hidden curriculum, I first analyzed how previous researchers defined "hidden curriculum". Among all my literature there was a consensus that is best characterized by Philip Jackson who is credited as coining the term, " Hidden Curriculum refers to the three R's- Rules, Routines and Regulations which structure life in the classroom". He also characterized it as covert tasks which produce unplanned lessons that students must master in order to cope with the daily classroom demands and students who fail to deal with the hidden curriculum often run the risk of school failure.

However, I will stretch his definition to include outside of the classroom. In my review of literature, this was best depicted in the work of Annette Hemmings, she published a study in 1999, where she observed and interviewed teachers and students to bring to life the Hidden Corridor Curriculum. Her findings align with the themes I have found in other studies, "hidden curriculum reproduces social class divisions, reinforces gender and racial inequalities, and otherwise perpetuates the status quo of dominant society'. (Hemmings 4) Jean Anyon explored this theme a bit deeper. In 1980, Jean Anyon published a study that explored students in New Jersey elementary schools that consisted of affluent communities, middle class, or working class. In her study she examined, what is knowledge, where does knowledge come from, whether students thought they had authority over work. She found that students from the affluent schools believed that knowledge was something they had control over. While students from the working class believed knowledge was supplied to them by their professional staff.

Anyon's main claim was that schools shaped perceptions of knowledge through materials and pedagogy. She also claimed that it varied upon how teachers introduce the material. (Anyon 11)

While Philip Jackson rose the issue on how teachers can help facilitate change and not bias material, Lisa Delpit best classified this phenomenon as the "culture of power".(Delpit 122) She found that teachers with different class backgrounds led to different roles, authoritative role versus the informal. Mainly her argument suggests that authoritative teachers do not supply students with tools needed to manipulate and fully participate in society. On the other hand, informal teachers supply the "codes" students need to fully understand their own expertness and create their own place in society. (Delpit 138)

While all of the aforementioned researchers focused on the people involved in the school and their role in shaping the hidden curriculum, Cameron McCarthy, chose a more macro study in analyzing how previous studies paid too much attention to the variables race, class and gender. She found that all too often sub-groups in the above variables are thought to be homogenous with their own set distinct characteristics. But in reality they are not and each sub-group has its own sub-group complete with its own set of characteristics. (McCarthy 327) She concludes that research needs to be reformed and focused on a more sophisticated conceptualization of the dynamic relations between minority and majority actors in the school setting and as a result we will move beyond the metaphysical theory and realize that the essential properties of an object can be distinguished from those that are accidental to it. (McCarthy 346)

In my review of literature, I did not find a study the concentrated solely on suburbs. It seems as though researchers assume that all suburban schools are monocultural and possess the same hidden curriculum. By studying high schools in two suburban towns, I believe my research fills a void in literature and conceptualizes an underconceptualized arena in educational studies. My intent is that my research will lead to new forums of discussion that may bring to the surface differences in formal and hidden curriculum in suburban schools, but more importantly the United States. I will also be able to make generalizations on whether or not the claims of hidden curriculum that were initially studied by Jackson in 1968 and Anyon in 1980 are still justified today.

METHODOLOGY

When I began my project I was unsure of the sensitivity that may arise due to some of my claims, so I offered both high schools confidentiality. To maintain confidentiality, the schools will be referred to as School A in District A and School B in District B. The numerical data in this paper is not precise to further lend to standards of confidentiality, however the figures are fairly similar. The districts were randomly selected from Hartford County school districts with one public high school grades 9-12 from the Connecticut State Department of Education website. I began with a total of 19 suburban districts. I calculated the Sample Interval (19/2= 9.5 round to 10), and used a Random number Chart to provide me with 2 suburban districts. My random number was 7, which is School A. I then used my sample interval of 10 to get my second school, School B.

In performing an ethnographic non-intrusive observational study on suburban school culture, I thought it would be best to employee the sociological theory of Symbolic Interactionism; A theoretical approach in sociology which focuses on social reality as constructed through the daily interaction of individuals and places strong emphasis on the role of symbols (gestures, signs, and language) as core elements of this interaction. (Elwell) I believe this led to a greater awareness of the totality of social interactions. By taking into account individual experiences and expectations within classroom dynamics I understood the culture as its own and was able to control my bias as an outsider. I observed each school to gather information, implementing the ethnographic method of thick description and Selective Verbatim. I primarily used thick description for the School Environment and Selective Verbatim for the Classroom Environment. The following checklist will be my criteria for observing both field sites. In creating my checklist I adapted some of David Wren's Hidden Curriculum Checklist from "School Culture: Exploring the Hidden Curriculum" and Jean Anyon's "Social Class and The Hidden Curriculum of Work".

School Environment

- Physical setup of the school and classroom (traditional setup vs. alternative)
- Posters (around the school and in the guidance offices)
- School Rules

Classroom Environment

- Type of work processes in the classroom.
- Student and Teacher decision-making and authority over work.
- Degree of creativity, individuality, teamwork, uniformity in student work.
- Teacher explanation of purpose and broader significance of the work.

I spent one day at each school observing the School Environment and one day at each school observing the Classroom Environment. This composed of arriving at the

school at the beginning of the school day (7:15AM) and departing at the end of the school day (2:20PM). To gather information on the School Environment, I walked around the entire school, observing the listed criteria and recording thick description through a sociological lens. To capture the Classroom Environment, I was provided with a schedule of 6 mixed grade and mixed level English classes at both sites. I attended each class and made observations based on my criteria in my checklist. I also documented verbal interaction between the teacher and student.

EXPLORING TOWN DEMOGRAPHICS

Racial Demographics	District A	District B
Population	23,000	26,000
White	92%	91%
Black	2%	3%
Hispanic	2%	4%
Asian	4%	2%

U.S. Census Bureau 2000

District A and District B are relatively similar in racial composition. The differential lies in the Hispanic and Asian population. District A has 2% more Asians while District B has 2% more Hispanics.

Economic Demographics	District A	District B
Per Cap Income 1999	$40,000	$30,000
Below Poverty	3%	2%

U.S. Census Bureau 2000

Economically District A is more affluent than District B by $10,000. District A has a slightly higher percentage (1%) of families living below poverty. This may signal an

unequal distribution of income in District A opposed to District B. However, the difference is too minute to make any inferences.

Educational Attainment	District A	District B
High School Graduates age 25 and Older	92%	84%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	50%	35%

U.S. Census Bureau 2000

District A is also more prosperous in terms of education. Of the 25 years and older population in both districts, District A has 8% more high school graduates. District A also has a 15% higher population with Bachelor's Degree or higher.

This raises the issue of whether or not these two suburbs are a fair comparison. As I previously stated, prior research did not conceptualize or even mention suburbs as a case of study. Most research looked at urban schools and made reference to their difference in comparison to suburban schools. It is interesting that there is a disparity between the two districts in income and educational attainment. If communities mirror the values, beliefs and norms transmitted in schools than I should find the same trends amongst the school level data.

SCHOOL COMPOSITION

Racial Demographics	School A	School B
White	88.%	88%
Black	5%	3%
Hispanic	2%	7%
Asian	5%	2%

Connecticut Department of Education 2001-02

In school racial composition we notice a change from the district level data. While whites remain relatively the same across schools, they have dropped by 3 % in the schools opposed to district percentages. We see the difference with an increase of

Hispanic and Black students. This may be due to Project Choice, a school choice program providing suburban educational experiences for Hartford children.

Student Performance	School A	School B
Juniors and Seniors Enrolled in an AP Course or Courses	50%	20%
Grade 12 Tested For AP Courses	40%	13%
Grade 10 Meeting All Four Sections CAPT	45%	30%
Graduates Tested For The SAT 1	96%	82%

Connecticut Department of Education 2001-02

While 50% of the student body at School A was enrolled in Advanced Placement courses only 20% of the students at School B were enrolled. School A outperformed students at School B on all four parts of the Connecticut Aptitude Performance test by 193 students. While both schools are above the state average of 500 for the verbal and math SAT sections, 14% more School A graduates took the SATs.

Activities of Graduates	School A	School B
Attending 2 or 4 Year College	93%	83%
Employed or in Military	5%	12%

Connecticut Department of Education 2001-02

School A graduates have a 10% greater differential of attending a 2 or 4 year college, while School B graduates have a 7% greater differential in joining the workforce or the military. It is interesting that at both schools the numbers of students that take the SATs are relatively similar to the number of students that go on to a 2 or 4 year college.

Resources	School A	School B
High Powered Computers with High Speed Internet Access	100%	65%
Certified Teachers	97%	75%
Spending Per Pupil	$9,500	$9,00

Connecticut Department of Education 2001-02

This chart raises many speculations for reasons why we see the disparity in student performance and activities of graduates. Many policy reformers still argue whether or not funding plays a role in educational outcomes. Whether it does or not, the fact still remains that students at School A have 35% greater access to more advanced computer technology and a 22% greater number of certified teachers. The differential in per pupil spending is $500.

OBSERVING THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

SCHOOL A

As I drove up what I thought was School A's driveway I realized I was entering a campus setting. To my left was a historic home and to my right was the Town Hall. As I made my way up the driveway I had to turn left in front of the Town Hall to go around the bend and park in the lot where I was told to park. From the many sport's utility vehicles parked in the lot, it was apparent that I was in affluent town. The per capita income in Town A is just under $40,000. As I made my way around to the front to observe student interactions before school, I noticed that there was a circular drive in the front where students were dropped off. Across from the circular drive was a circle patch of land with benches and a flag pole. A few students were seated there doing some reading while others where outside of the main doors playing Hacky Sac. The majority

of the students upon being dropped off entered the building and went to the lockers. After noticing that most students entered the building I decided to enter the building.

As I entered the main doors I was greeted with the Main Office to my right and the Principal's Office to my left. As I walked further into the building I noticed that the hallways were carpeted and that rock n roll was playing over the loud speaker. I later found out that students run a radio show prior to first period. As I made my way to the Main Hallway, I noticed display upon display case. Ten of the twelve display cases which took up the majority of the wall space exhibited academic and athletic individual and team achievements. One was dedicated to alumni that either gained prestige as professional athletes, politicians or actors. Along the same hallway stood the Performing Arts Center, gymnasiums, the Music classrooms and the Arts classrooms. Later on the principal told me that they wanted to encompass athletics as a performing art, thus they like the placement of the gymnasium in the performing arts area. I was also told that arts are a dominate part of the school culture and that students are almost looked down upon for not participating. This is when I first noticed a television mounted in the hallway that displayed the time, class periods and scrolled the news and events for the day and week. Students where in charge of programming the news and events daily along with making a ten minute episode of school events, sporting news, weather and other miscellaneous news that aired weekly in each class during homeroom. I did not notice and school security presence. I was later told that a police officer patrolled the campus area. In the hallways and classrooms I noticed students were wearing hats, doorags; *a wave cap popularized by the Hip Hop genre*, and coats. Students were also talking on their cellular phones in the hallway

The classrooms were setup in clusters by subject and in each cluster there was a departmental office for faculty. As I walked around I noticed that the majority of classrooms were set up in either a u-shape or an alternative to the tradition row-seating. The guidance cluster was made up of the guidance office and a career center area. Outside of the guidance office was 3 bulletin boards with 34 college pamphlets. The schools ranged from Ivy Leagues such as Yale and Harvard to State Schools Central Connecticut State and the University of Connecticut, to Community Colleges Teikyo Post and Naugatuck Valley.

SCHOOL B

As I arrived at school B I was struck by its size, it was a big school. However it looked old, I was surprised to find out it was built a quarter of a century after School A. I parked in the lot adjacent to the main entrance. This time I was one of five sport utility vehicles parked in the lot. The majority of the vehicles appeared to be Toyotas and Hondas. The per capita income of District B is just under $30,000. Students were being dropped of at the main entrance. The drive around the main entrance resembled a u-shape and the patch of land across from the drop-off point was grassy with a few concrete walkways. The majority of the students entered and went directly to their lockers.

The area around the main entrance consisted of a lobby with benches outside of the main office. In the Main Hallway was a display case dedicated to artwork by teachers of the school. The hallways were carpeted, and the remainder of the main Hallway was lockers and classrooms. Most students were grouped together at their lockers and appeared to be chatting with friends. As I walked in to take a closer look, school security

asked if I was substituting for the day. After explaining my project, I thought it would be best to get a visitor's badge from my contact person at the school.

As I walked around the building I realized the classrooms were setup in clusters by subject. The majority of classrooms were setup in traditional row seating. A few classrooms had portable televisions in them, I later found out teachers had to request then in advanced from the media center. As I walked passed the gymnasium I noticed the display cases of athletic achievements. Along each cluster, there were displays with students work and achievements in the clusters' subject area.

The guidance office was under construction, so the staff was using an office within the main office. On the door there was a sign for SAT Test dates and a pamphlet for Southern New Hampshire University and the University of Connecticut. To compensate for the lack of college pamphlets and posters on the wall, which maybe due to the fact that the office is under construction, I acquired a 2003 College Visits list. Of the 64 schools listed 0 were Ivy League Colleges. A number of prestigious schools such as Bentley and Middlebury were listed; however the majority are small private and state institutions. As I was walking up the back hallway to the media center, I noticed one of the heating panels in the hallway was missing a cover. I attempted to use the restroom only to find it locked. Security later informed that they had to limit the number of open restrooms due to students smoking in them. Students were not wearing hats or coats in the building.

ANALYSIS

FORMAL CURRICULUM

COURSE CATALOGS

Both schools provide their students with similar formal curriculum. To determine the courses offered at each school, I looked through course catalogs provided by each school. Both course catalogs were binded, this was interesting to me because in prior studies I did not come across a high school with binded course catalogs similar to the college style course catalogs. Both catalogs provided a listing of courses along with a description of the course content. It was easy to decipher that both schools offer a similar range of courses. In fact I could not find one class at one school that the other did not offer. School A and School B both offer the same amount of Advanced Placement courses. It just so happens that students at School A happen to enroll in them more than students at School B. They have a similar number of courses allotted to the Arts and Technological study.

COURSE LEVELS

	School A	School B
Level 1	Advanced Placement	Above Average Ability
Level 2	Accelerated	Average Ability
Level 3	College Preparatory	Individual small group help

School A and B Course Catalogs

School A levels its courses from Advanced Placement to college preparatory while school B levels its courses from Above Average Ability to courses designed for students who may need individual small group help in certain academic areas. The fact that the lowest level at School A is labeled college preparatory transmits a signal to each student that they are on track towards attending college. None of the levels at School B

have any mention of college. Above Average Ability the highest level at School B, is defined as students with outstanding ability and a high degree of interests. The disparity in labels and definitions amongst the levels at both schools speaks to the values that are created and expected of each student.

Hidden Curriculum

DISPLAY CASES

Both School A and School B have display cases exhibiting student achievement. However, School A had it placed in the Main Hallway easily visible to anyone that walked into the school. Students must pass these displays daily upon entering and leaving the school. This stresses academic and athletic achievement and the fact that they had it all together can lead one to think that athletic achievement is just as important as academic achievement. The combination of the arts and athletics in the same area also further cements the fact that School A stresses extracurricular activities. 50 percent of School A students take more than the required credits in the Arts for graduation. (CT Dept. ED) In fact the differential between students as School A that take Art credit beyond graduation requirement is 20% more than School B. The opposite is true for School B students when it comes to Vocational Education. On Average School A students take 15% more than the required credits for graduation per subject when compared to School B students. (CT Dept. ED)

SETUP AND WORK PROCESSES IN THE CLASSROOM

Teachers at school A tended to emphasize creativity while School B staff emphasized teacher's authority over work. Students at School A benefited from group work and in depth discussions while students at School B worked individually or

completed work with little discussion. The majority of classrooms at School A had a u-shape or alternative setting to the traditional row seating. School B classrooms had a majority of traditional row seating, 4 of the 6 classes I sat in on had assigned seats. The difference in work processes in the classroom was highly visible at School A, where a teacher had students write and then share their writing with the class, which lead to class discussion. The teacher kept reiterating to the class the importance of each student doing their own work than sharing with the class. All of the classrooms I attended at School A had flip charts where each group had to complete a task write it on the flip chart than share with the class. On the other hand, School B teachers had their students write in their journals and not share them aloud with the class. One class, a 12th grade English course, students spent the entire period filling in a ditto as they watched a film on William Shakespeare. A class at School A spent part of the class trying to imagine what the teacher meant as he flashed index cards of lines from Hamlet. As he would flash the card and read the line aloud he would ask the students to imagine if they were the character, and lead them into class discussion. The reminder of the class was spent assigning roles and reading Hamlet aloud.

School Enforcement

School A staff emphasizes independence while School B staff emphasizes discipline and order. Students at School A were allowed to wear hats, doorags and their coats while in class. Some students even talked on their cell phone in between classes. At school B, 1 of the 6 classes I sat in on allowed students to wear their hats during class. The other 5 classes, teachers made it a point to announce at the beginning of class that students should not be wearing a hat and that they should have their hats, coats and cell

phones in their lockers. In one class at School B, the teacher kept interrupting the reading session to tell a boy to take off his coat. The fact that School B focuses on discipline may account for the reason why the need security guards in the school. Teens naturally rebel as they look for means of expression. Like School B, School A has a policy in their student/parent handbook restricting the wearing of hats in the building. However, School A's choice to not enforce the hat rule may be combating the students rebellion stage and allowing them to be perceptive learners.

DISCUSSIONS

Based on the findings it is evident that the two suburban schools offer similar formal curriculum, however they impose different hidden curriculum. Hidden curriculum is imposing culture differently in Metropolitan Hartford, and more importantly one can infer across the nation. The created culture is shaping students and leading them towards different opportunities. Policy makers need to spend less time worrying about what books students read, and or funding issues, and spend an equal amount of time examining school culture to gain a better understanding of how it is shaped. We need to understand education as a socialization process. Studying the hidden curriculum offers a more complete picture of what is occurring in schools and the culture it creates. A school's culture creates a climate where certain values and symbols are established as the norm for that school. Students are expected to exist within that norm or they are deemed underachievers. Hopefully by bringing the hidden curriculum forward we can gain insight on how school culture is shaped and forms achievement.

Educational inequality is an important issue that needs to be tackled in the United States. However, most reformers do not consider Suburban schools as schools in need of

assistance. The fact is most Suburban school districts have ample funds to offer a variety of courses. Their ability to have a strong formal curriculum is what makes many reformers dismiss what is going on beyond the material and up to date building. The fact is that there are many middle income suburbs like School B in the United States. While they appear to be above state goals on standardized tests and on or above average with sending students on to higher education. The truth is they may not be increasing the life chances of their student body beyond the present district demographic. If the hidden curriculum mirrors the community's norms, values and attitudes, schools will continue to reproduce the same demographic time and time again. Public Schools are to educate for the social good, but also to educate a student to their full potential. To move schools forward educators need to take into account every aspect that may improve schooling, not generate recyclable citizens.

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