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The 'ideal' higher education student: understanding the hidden curriculum to enable institutional change

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ABSTRACT

In England, more students from a wider range of backgrounds participate in higher education than in previous generations. This has led to a focus on how students from diverse backgrounds can fit better with existing higher education institutions. This is often framed in terms of 'deficits' that these students have to overcome to more closely resemble the 'implied' or 'ideal' students around which institutions are, often unconsciously, modelled. We flip this focus by thinking about how educational institutions can evolve in response to diverse students. We use the theoretical lens of the hidden curriculum to explore student perceptions of 'ideal' students. Findings are based on research with eight students as co-researchers and 24 further student participants in an academically selective English higher education institution. We find that there are many aspects of hidden or assumed practices within universities students encounter when first coming to higher education. Focusing specifically on learning environments and curricula, we found that ideas about an implied student were evident in the institution, that this mattered for the experience of learning – and that consciousness of hidden processes helps. We conclude by suggesting that instead of focusing on how to change students to fit institutions, institutions need to be open and adaptable to all students.

KEYWORDS

Hidden curriculum; higher education; student identity; ideal student; student identity

Introduction

There is an increasing focus on how students from diverse backgrounds fit in higher education institutions often discussed in the UK in relation to a widening participation agenda (Connell-Smith and Hubble 2018). This translates into efforts both before entering higher education, and also in terms of ensuring that students who have entered higher education can develop a sense of belonging and achieve in their studies; Scott et al. (2014), e.g., writes that 'by the time the widening participation student graduates [. . .] it is assumed that they will be constituted as the standard or traditional

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student' (96), in the sense that students will be able to overcome difficulties that they experience due to their background.

This way of thinking seems to be established in some of the higher education literature (indicatively Bathmaker et al. 2016; Waller, Ingram, and Ward 2017). Yet this approach is criticised (e.g., Crozier, Reay, and Clayton 2019; Trowler 2019) for ignoring structural inequalities; and it can also be argued that it places all emphasis on how students can fit within an existing institutional culture rather than on how educational institutions can change in order not just to provide for diverse students – but in response to them.

This focus on the students has often given rise to concepts of an 'ideal' (Wong and Chiu 2018, 2019) or 'implied' (Stevens 2007) student. Although such concepts are intended to support better understanding of success, difficulties and dropout rates (or act as 'a thinking tool to better understand the expectations and experiences of university students', Wong and Chiu 2019, 9), they can also reinforce preconceptions that can be unhelpful to students who do not (or perceive themselves not to) meet assumed expectations, for example, because of where they were born, the conditions of their lives, having a disability, identifying as members of a minority group etc. The paper proposes that we need to change our focus from students to institutions – not just by placing the responsibility to institutions, but by inviting new institutional cultures to develop.

In order to explore this, we report on a small-scale empirical study using the lens of the hidden curriculum to problematise issues of student identity in higher education. Exploring the hidden curriculum can be the key to understanding institutional cultures and in turn identifying ways to challenge or transform them. Why the hidden curriculum? Reay (2004) writes that when it comes to exploring student identity in higher education literature, everything seems to be about habitus, the undeniably influential concept, put forward by Pierre Bourdieu, that in essence describes how one's individual history links with their present (Bourdieu 2005). Although Reay raised this point back in 2004, it is still a current issue: a search on Education Research Complete in October 2019 for 'habitus AND higher education' produced more than 200 results between 2004 and 2019. Influenced by Reay's point, in our study, we were intrigued to explore an alternative to Bourdieu's habitus or cultural capital and opted to employ the less frequently used theoretical lens of the hidden curriculum – a starting point for framing the experiences of students (Semper and Blasco 2018).

The hidden curriculum is about unintended messages, underpinning norms, values and assumptions that are often so unquestioned that they have become invisible. This is because educational institutions operate based on policy, guidelines and expectations that reflect widely accepted principles about what a higher education institution represents, what it

means to be a learner, what counts as knowledge etc. Semper and Blasco (2018) suggest that 'hidden is relative to who is looking' (484). The hidden curriculum may not be deliberately obscured, and its hidden assumptions only become visible when they come into conflict with a deliberate and exposing challenge (e.g., the Rhodes must fall campaign, Chaudhuri 2016); or when students from particular backgrounds experience a tension between their home culture and the institution's culture – a matter that has often been explored through habitus (Jin and Ball 2019; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). Portelli (1993) suggests that the hidden curriculum is about a relationship, often an unequal one, where one party has the power to 'hide' something from another party; however, both the process of hiding, and what is being hidden may well be hidden from the hider too (and one could argue that there is rarely an intention to hide).

Semper and Blasco (2018) argue that it is possible to expose the hidden curriculum to the extent that there is nothing hidden, although this idea can be questioned, since any institution's curriculum, policies or culture will reflect some unarticulated assumptions. Hidden curriculum seems to escape a clear definition; it was Jackson (1970) who first defined it in his book 'Life in Classrooms' to mainly describe a tendency of school curricula to reproduce the inequalities of wider society. As Elliot et al. (2016) remind us, this definition highlighted negative connotations:

> '[Hidden curriculum from Jackson's perspective] pertains to non-academic aspects of learning or, more specifically, trivial classroom events, which collectively form the unwanted class routine and elements of the learning environment. It lurks behind the official curriculum and is presented with a strong, derogatory, or disapproving tone, hence the need to avoid, conquer, abolish, or master it . . . ' (739).

Jackson (1970) was disillusioned with education appearing to reinforce gender, racial and class inequalities rather than challenge them. Ahola (2000) notes that Jackson's original definition of the hidden curriculum suggests that hidden or unexamined assumptions and values can be at odds with what is stated or implied in the official curriculum – what has also been called 'null curriculum' (Flinders, Noddings, and Thornton 1986) to draw attention to what was left out of education, not seen as worth acknowledging or learning.

With regards to Jackson's original definition, Apple and King (1977) differentiate between weak and strong hidden curricula: the former (weak) encompass issues such as socialisation of students and understandings of professionalism, whereas the latter (strong) recognise Jackson's perspectives of rather ominous motives in preserving a hierarchy of power, knowledge and social privilege through social and cultural reproduction. The strong perspective is still current in more contemporary research – Anderson (2001), e.g., suggests that studying the hidden curriculum is useful in 'unveiling the

supposed real agenda of formal education' (30). However, the concept of the hidden curriculum gradually took a broader (and less critical or political) meaning to express any type of often unintentional learning that is not prescribed by formal curricula (i.e., resembling Apple and King 1977 weak perspective).

For instance, it has been described as 'informal learning' (Elliot et al. 2016), 'informal curriculum' (Joynt et al. 2018), the 'climate' of the classroom (Çengel and Türkoglu 2016), 'societal, institutional or lecturers' values that are transmitted unconsciously to students' (Cotton, Winter, and Bailey 2013, 192), and 'the divergence between what is overtly taught in educational institutions and what students actually learn' (Winter and Cotton 2012, 785). The hidden curriculum has also been compared to a 'hidden agenda' that can be represented as the underwater and invisible part of an iceberg (Sharpe and Curwen 2012) (which interestingly is a lot larger than the overwater visible part).

The hidden curriculum has also been discussed with reference to the continuum between explicit knowledge (knowledge that has been or can be articulated in official documents, reports, policies etc.) and tacit knowledge (knowledge of experience that resists articulation) (Semper and Blasco 2018). Tacit and explicit knowledge are interconnected and mutually complementary (e.g., Nonaka and Von Krogh 2009), and the same can be argued for official and hidden curricula – a similar point was made by Morley (2010) based on Apple's (1980) argument: 'the overt and the hidden [curricula] are not mutually exclusive but form a complex mechanism of production and reproduction' (Morley 2010, 389).

With regards to student identity, Semper and Blasco (2018) argue that the hidden curriculum 'can only become explicit, if educators acknowledge the interpersonal dimension of learning, both as it pertains to themselves and to their students' (482). This suggests that it is not a static element, but a complex and contextual set of processes that come about through social interactions between students and tutors – and in a way that is both about 'being' as well as 'doing'.

Different writers suggest that different lessons are learnt in the space of this interaction: for Mossop et al. (2013) this is how professional identity is developed; an issue also explored by Joynt et al. (2018) and Watts (2015) who particularly notes that 'the education process into the profession acts as socialisation of the student presenting a kind of moral order unique for each discipline or profession' (367) – this 'comes to occupy the space of the hidden curriculum' (369). Ahola (2000) notes that when it comes to higher education one of the dimensions of the hidden curriculum is learning to learn – i.e., learning what it means to be a learner, and in this case a higher education student.

As discussed, this is relevant to the concept of the 'implied' student (Stevens 2007; Ulriksen 2009) in that processes within higher education

institutions are often implicitly modelled around a certain type of student, such as a young, white, able-bodied student, living away from home, without caring responsibilities or financial worries. The significance of this is that students who do not fit the implied model can feel marginalised or might not be readily able to infer and anticipate what they need to do to fit in and achieve in their studies. Recent literature has also explored staff's and students' perceptions of the 'ideal' student and has discussed ways of bridging different expectations (Wong and Chiu 2018, 2019).

The hidden curriculum seems to draw attention to what higher education students are expected not just to 'do' but most importantly to 'be'; and becomes particularly evident when students do not fit well with such unarticulated expectations. We explored some of these issues around the hidden curriculum from the perspective of a diverse range of students themselves addressing the following research questions:

(1) How do students from diverse cultural and social backgrounds perceive the hidden curriculum?
(2) Can we identify and expose aspects of the hidden curriculum?

Methods

This study was conducted in a Russell Group higher education institution in the South West of England and was internally funded. It adopted a participatory co-creation approach in that a group of eight students was recruited through a student partnership scheme and was involved in methods design, data collection and dissemination of findings. This supports students developing as researchers with recorded benefits to the students themselves (e.g., Walkington, Hill, and Kneale 2017; Sandover et al. 2012) and enhances the project methodologically as students have direct access to the hidden curriculum in a way that academic researchers might not have (Portelli 1993).

Our students/co-researchers attended both undergraduate and postgraduate social sciences and humanities courses and were in different stages in their studies. The students formed, together with two members of staff, a development team. The active engagement of students in the study was a way of ensuring that perceptions of the hidden curriculum would arise from the students themselves, rather than be defined by the lead researchers or the literature.

The development team met for six workshops throughout the academic year Sept 2018-June 2019; workshops involved research related training and activities, including developing brief scenarios to reflect ideas about 'assumed' (i.e., 'implied' or 'ideal') students, drawing on the following question as a guide: do tutors assume that students have specific

characteristics, backgrounds, experiences? The topic came out of discussions with the students/co-researchers and it was thus co-decided as being relevant to the hidden curriculum; the brief scenarios were expected to enable students to reflect on the hidden curriculum in a less direct way. This is one of the scenarios that was developed by the students:

> It is Dan's first seminar in his new module. His seminar leader asked him to stand up in class and share his view on the preparatory reading. Do you think this is reasonable of the seminar leader to ask?

A number of variations were then introduced (one by one) to explore different background characteristics and identity intersections, such as: Dan has attended a single-sex school/has anxiety-related difficulties/has a physical disability/English is not his first language etc. Different variations were expected to generate different responses, thus deeper reflections on the hidden curriculum.

The scenario explored the following assumptions: that students are comfortable to express their opinions publicly; that students are feeling comfortable being themselves in the higher education classroom; that students are prepared by school for the requirements of higher education; and, finally, that both seen and unseen difficulties are taken into consideration and are respected by staff and peers.

The scenarios developed were then used as stimuli for discussion during seven focus group interviews with 24 undergraduate students recruited from social sciences and humanities courses of the university – different students from the ones participating in the development team. They were accompanied by questions, following the same structure across scenarios covering university experiences, policy issues and reflections. We also asked participants to make practical recommendations in terms of enhancing practice.

The focus groups took place in March and April 2019 and were conducted by the students/co-researchers, as in the Cotton, Winter, and Bailey (2013) study that also used student researchers to interview other students. Focus groups usually lasted two hours and the transcripts were professionally transcribed. Fieldnotes from the student co-researchers were also collected and analysed. A voucher was offered as an incentive for participation in the focus groups.

The transcripts from the focus group interviews were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) framework by one of the authors. Initial codes were generated inductively from each transcript and converging codes were compiled into a theme. Themes were characterised primarily by prevalence, although there were themes that occurred infrequently but were considered to be significant. For example, the impact of marked seminars on neuro-divergent students was mentioned once but nature of the theme magnified its importance; on the other hand, identity was a topic

that occurred frequently in almost every focus group interview. The themes were then shared with the remaining authors and were discussed for reliability purposes; during this process, consideration was given to potential subthemes, the collapsing of themes and the interaction and relation of subthemes to the main themes. Disagreements were resolved with discussion.

Three broader themes emerged: the implied student; interpersonal relationships; and dimensions of diversity. These themes were then discussed with the students/co-researchers and were further refined at a workshop. The detailed coding structure is available upon request.

Ethical issues

There were two key ethical considerations. First, in terms of ethical process, the study had institutional ethics permission. Participation was voluntary and all participants signed a consent form. Anonymity and confidentiality were applied to all aspects of the project.

Second, there were substantive ethical considerations in anticipating the impact participating in the research might have for the students. Here, we were careful to create an environment of respect and listening among the researchers and participants where they could talk about their experiences in a safe space. Moreover, we were mindful that some of the experiences co-researchers and participants were encouraged to reflect upon could lead students to engage in wider reflections regarding their identity at university and beyond. Some of these reflections could be empowering but also sensitive or uncomfortable. We thus tried to develop a sense of nurturing community within the research team so students who had experienced, in different ways, feelings of non-belonging within the university could share their experiences and feelings. We aimed to help students to discuss not only their personal experiences, but to see through the personal, the collective, and unmask structures within the university culture that posed barriers to students from particular backgrounds. We tried to make the students/co-researchers feel comfortable confiding in us, so that, in turn, they could do the same with the students participating in the focus groups.

There were moments where the students/co-researchers were emotional and conveyed to us that this project was the first time that they were given the opportunity to reflect on such issues. Some of them noted that the project itself led to the realisation that structural, not just personal, barriers exist; that they realised that they can be experienced by many students; and that they can be challenged. For example, one student who grew up in a rural community in one of the devolved regions of the UK and one student who had grown up in a buzzing city in East Asia realised that they both felt

a profound sense of not belonging to a university and place that was different from their experiences growing up.

We continued to engage with some of the students/co-researchers after the end of the project to ensure they can benefit from it after its completion in terms of personal growth and practical skills development. Our one-to-one post-project discussions with the co-researchers (discussed in detail in the findings section) showed that they had a positive experience of exploring these sensitive issues: the project helped these students to recognise that they were not alone in this journey; and that their difficulties were not necessarily personal but structural and, thus, also possible to change. Some of the students were already engaged with activist work (e.g., with regards to gender, LGBTQ+ etc.), so they could draw parallels between the project and their activist activities and ideas – we encouraged such connections.

Moreover, they arrived at a place where they could see common ground between the experiences of a rural UK student and a cosmopolitan overseas student, despite these experiences perhaps initially appearing like they would be rather different.

Involving students as co-creators requires researchers to think about ethical issues beyond statutory requirement to elicit informed consent. As students are taken on a journey of discovery that may not always be comfortable or that could challenge existing beliefs, it is important for academic staff to create safe spaces and opportunities for ongoing dialogue as student thinking grows.

Findings

Impact on the co-researchers

Our first set of findings concerned the students/co-researchers themselves. While these students had responded to an open call for co-researchers yielding 30 applications, the eight recruited co-researchers all had strong motivations for applying to this particular project on the hidden curriculum rather than the wide range of other employment opportunities open to students through the university's campus working scheme. For example, the following two excerpts from their applications highlight their own experiences: 'I grew up in a culturally diverse and considerably deprived city in the old industrial Midlands. The uni was a culture shock to my system; it is overwhelmingly white and regularly gripped by racism scandals'. (co-researcher 2) '[. . .] I knew going back into education as a mature student was going to be difficult and I was going to be different, but nothing prepared me for being ignored and pushed to the outside of the group'. (co-researcher 6)

So, the co-researchers own backgrounds and experiences served as the starting point for the group discussions in exploring hidden curricula. Across the researchers, their experiences represented a range of dimensions of diversity with regards to social background, schooling (state or private), gender, age, race, LGBT and disability in different intersections. Individually and through their group discussions they brought diverse and unique insights to the project.

In reflections at the end of the research project, it was noteworthy that there was a complete absence of any mention of pay as having been a motivator for participation. And, while there was some mentioning of skills enhancement and CV building, the most important learning points from the project had been consciousness building: '. . . it just really really . . . helped me make sense of why certain things are going on . . . it really helped me understand my place . . . especially coming from a very rural, single parent . . . low-income household.' (co-researcher 4)

The second set of findings related to the challenge in homing in on the curriculum as the study's focus and the locus for hidden practices. When first brain-storming the hidden curriculum with the student co-researchers, it took a long time for everyone to appreciate that our focus would be on teaching and learning in higher education. Many initial discussions focused on the social experiences, societies and halls of residences.

For example, one student said she encountered someone who had asked her 'How many horses do you keep?' and was bewildered by the chasm of social differences that opened up when the answer was zero. Other issues focused on the challenge of transitioning to more independent living and relationships with families and friends. It is important to acknowledge that, while our project specifically wished to focus on teaching and learning practices, there was a wide array of issues that co-researchers and participants highlighted when first hearing the term 'hidden curriculum' that were not specifically related to teaching and learning.

The second set of findings relate specifically to the focus groups our student co-researchers undertook. The findings are presented under three broader themes: the implied student; interpersonal relationships and dimensions of diversity.

The implied student: reformulating an identity in the higher education environment

The perceptions of students as reported in the focus groups indicated particular expectations at both an institutional and an interpersonal level. Students reported that one of the primary difficulties in transitioning to university was navigating a new identity:

> 'I was 18 when I arrived; I didn't even know what me was and then I just tried to fit into something'. (Focus Group 3: R2, 8 March, PM)

> 'I think that maybe because this is your first experience at university and because you come from … Your identity is stripped from you and you're trying to make a first impression and these old, clingy identities [unclear]. I'm not saying that you're going to give up, but I think how important it is might wash out a bit once you figure out your own existence at university'. (Focus Group 3: R2, 8 March, PM)

Many students reported feeling vulnerable in their own identity in this transition to university. They also felt this was at odds with an assumption by teaching staff that they were fully formed adults with opinions; teaching staff were perceived to assume that students have formed a firm identity that informed their ideas and work. However, students might not be comfortable to defend their own views – and often for the 'wrong' reasons:

> ' … with certain lecturers you know that if you want the good grade, you take the stance that you know they lean towards in argument in your essay, regardless of whether you believe it or not. And I have done that myself because I know that I am likely to get marked down'. (Focus Group 2: R3, 8 March, AM)

This suggests that it might take time for students to understand and work effectively within the culture and conventions of a higher education institution:

> 'I think, now that I'm in 3rd Year, and I look back, the fact that I speak in seminars now blows my mind. Because I remember getting here and being like, I don't want to speak because, I was very worried that I'd say something, and someone would come back with something I didn't understand, I think. So, I was quite quiet. So, I think I was a bit shocked, I think I wasn't really sure what to expect. I didn't know what a seminar was, if that makes sense'. (Focus Group 5: R1, 15 March)

Liberalism was the primary evident culture at the university alluded to by respondents, which for some was reported as more limiting than liberating:

> 'Like I think we are assumed to be very liberal, and like leftist and stuff, but I can imagine if someone wasn't that way, that they wouldn't be able to speak up'. (Focus Group 7: R1, 26 March)

Some students reported experiencing some disconnect between the institutional culture they were beginning to decode and their own familial background and previous experiences. This created tensions regarding wishing to and trying to fit in and how to develop a new identity while maintaining their previous self-concept.

Interpersonal relationships: the role of lecturing staff

Higher education can be experienced as a fluid environment where students are situated in a transitional community, involving an interaction between

the past and the present, often an environment of hesitation and insecurity; students reported that they wanted to be part of the academic community but were sometimes unsure how to access it, particularly in the early stages of their university experiences. Dissatisfaction appeared to occur when there was a disconnect between the awareness of this identity crisis amongst students by teaching staff, the support teaching staff offered and the expectations of the type of interpersonal relationship students had of teaching staff.

During this challenging time, students tended to look towards teaching staff as an anchor, a type of linchpin holding their higher education experiences together – a crucial relationship through which they could access support and develop a sense of belonging. However, some teaching staff were reported to be less aware of the importance of this relationship to students with this often having an impact on students' levels of comfort in seeking advice and support.

A positive relationship with lecturing staff was described as based on an understanding of the needs of each student, as in this case:

> 'The module convener, he really understood the fact that – not just disabilities – but he understood the special learning plans that the university offered, he's really in support of it, and then he would spend ten minutes of his lecture just talking about how to deal with anxiety, how you deal with stress, how you deal with depression. And then he put it as part of his exam, just so that all the students in the class would feel comfortable talking about it and learning about it'. (Focus Group 4: R1, 13 March)

Students viewed teaching staff as central to their experience, an idea expressed as a need to develop strong, nurturing relationships with teaching staff, as described by the student below:

> 'I think one really interesting thing about having conversations and close connections and discussions with members of staff – as a student, who might feel like they have less of a right to be here, because of their background, or don't feel necessarily like they have all of that pre-existing knowledge – [is that it] can really comfort [students]. It's a form of validation, if a member of staff engages with you in conversation and says, I enjoyed this, come visit me and let's discuss anything course related or not; that really gives you a sense of this is also my place and space to be in'. (Focus Group 1: R1, 01 March, PM)

In reflections from our eight co-researchers at the end of the project, it was also clear that the co-researching experience with two experienced academics had been a key milestone creating interpersonal relationships and a sense of community and even purpose during their university journey:

> 'it helped me feel more like I was part of the university . . . and feeling belonging amongst the other people who were on the projects . . . you know, working on an end goal.' (Co-researcher 3)

Diversity: seen and unseen dimensions

Discussions relating to diversity identified both seen and unseen differences in students. These differences were sometimes highlighted or hidden. Seen differences related primarily to ethnicity and some aspects of social class. Students reported that the 'typical' student at this particular university was viewed to be middle upper class and from a white British ethnic background:

> 'I've had conversations with people from working class backgrounds and who are not white, and both groups usually know what they're getting themselves into. [. . .] You go online, you Google the university, and the first things that will come up is uni is very white, preppy university'. (Focus Group 1: R1, 01 March, PM)

Nonetheless, students who considered themselves to be from working class background or less wealthy families reported feelings of marginalisation and disconnect with their fellow students. There were aspects of social class that were highly visible; for example, the accommodation students were able to afford and the activities they were able to participate in. What was less visible though was previous experience, with students making assumptions about others based on experiences they had:

> 'And therefore, when they speak [in a seminar], they won't be conscious of other people with different ways of thinking, so when they express themselves that might end up being quite hurtful to other people. Not by choice, but just because they are not as conscious. Maybe a verbal example would be, "oh, you have a horse"? - I've never gone horse riding. – "You've never ridden a . . . Never? Oh, my god, really? You've never ridden a horse?" - "No, I haven't ridden a horse, because there aren't any bloody horse ranches in my area". (Focus Group 3: R1, 08 March, PM)

Students who considered themselves to be working class tended to seek 'likeminded' individuals amongst peers and also support from lecturers with a perceived similar background. This can create to some extent alienation of particular groups within the university, although some of these relationships were experienced as supportive. Students were unsure about the responsibility of the university in altering this:

> 'It can make you feel alienated. Every single time, it's very strange, but if I find someone who's from a working-class background, I'm a lot more likely to be like – friend, let's be friends. There's a weird sort of . . . We get it and no-one else is talking about it and no-one else gets it, and . . . I don't know what the university could do to fix that, because it feels like small things. (Focus Group 3: R1, 08 March, PM)

A further dimension of unseen diversity relates mainly to mental health and invisible differences in support requirements amongst students. For example, a neuro-divergent student grappled with participating in marked

seminars. The format of the seminar was designed around a neurotypical student. This created significant anxiety for the respondent, as in the instance below:

> 'And that actually makes seminar participation marks . . . It's only 10%, but it freaks me out because they have things, they're assessing you on that are applying to neurotypical people. Social skill things, like being polite and not talking over people and responding correctly, and these are all things that are, of course, associated with politeness. But they are also things that do not naturally come to me at all, and sometimes if I am tired, if I'm stressed, I will be in a seminar and I'll be like, oh, god, I've said the wrong thing, I'm going to get a terrible seminar mark. And it can . . . It's kind of bad for autistic people, because it's putting a grade on the thing we can't do'. (Focus Group 3: R1, 08 March, PM)

Discussion

So, what have we learnt? We uncovered perceptions about an implied student, we found that such perceptions matter, and that consciousness of such hidden processes helps. We conclude by suggesting ways of making higher education more inclusive by making aspects of the curriculum less hidden.

First, we uncovered perceptions about an implied student in the university. Our students/coresearchers and focus group participants had constructed a particular type of student that they would describe as 'typical' for the university (middle-upper class, white, non-disabled). Messages conveyed through the hidden curriculum often translate into perceptions of an 'implied' or 'ideal' higher education student (Stevens 2007; Wong and Chiu 2018, 2019; Ulriksen 2009), i.e., the projection of the student who is likely to thrive within a particular institutional culture.

Second, we found evidence that the hidden curriculum matters for teaching and learning practices in higher education and can have 'real consequences for students especially those from non-traditional backgrounds' (Wong and Chiu 2019, 3). This is because the implied student, aside from their embodiment and radiating confidence, was seen as fitting well with the rewards in learning and teaching in social sciences and humanities – for comfortably speaking in public and having a well-defined identity they are happy to defend, voicing opinions not too far away from the dominant opinion held by academic staff and perhaps being happy to ignore the possibility of alternative views and perspectives.

Third, our co-researchers and the student participants told us that it was helpful to have participated in the project and that their consciousness of their own situation and their situation in relation to others was heightened. This awareness in itself led to increased confidence in speaking about implied assumptions. Some of the students/co-researchers and students participating in the focus groups reported either directly or indirectly that

they did not fit with the projection of the implied student; and that this realisation was a source of anxiety leading to a feeling that 'they have less of a right to be here', a feeling of non-belonging. The different educational and cultural experiences of different students mean that not all of them will be able to effortlessly negotiate 'the hidden rules of the game' (Portelli 1993, 345) and confident classroom interactions.

A perceived lack of fit with an institution's culture can affect a sense of belonging; belonging has been widely explored in higher education (such as, Thomas 2012; Suhlmann et al. 2018). These approaches largely position participation with reference to a pre-existing institutional culture, and it is particular learner characteristics (social class, gender, age, race, disability, caring responsibilities, financial worries etc.) that might act as barriers to fostering a sense of belonging – and this was also the approach we took when designing our project.

Yet, another way of approaching this would be in terms of how institutional cultures themselves can evolve in response to new and unfamiliar student identities. This argument resonates with conclusions reached by other researchers working on the experiences of working class, international and BAME students in higher education: Reay et al. concluded that although working class students might feel they do not belong, 'elite universities need non-traditional students just as much as the students need them' and that 'both need the other in order to flourish, the students academically and the universities socially' (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009, 1116). Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo (2015) also suggested that international students have the agency to transform the institutions in which they are located.

Universities UK recommendations was that in order for institutions to become more inclusive to BAME students, they should aim to transform their cultures – and one way of doing this is by exploring their hidden curricula (Universities UK 2019, 18). The value of this approach can be the shifting of the attention away from the students – whether they are 'traditional' or 'non-traditional', or whether they meet 'ideal' or 'implied' projections – to the institution, highlighting that it is the responsibility of the institution to change and evolve. This is also the basic principle of inclusive education: that all learners without exception have a place in the learning encounter, and that it is an institutional requirement to change in order to accommodate diverse learners – as opposed to assimilate them in a pre-existing culture (Cline and Frederickson 2009).

This of course poses a unique challenge for higher education, since it is by its very nature selective, and therefore not automatically open to all students, as school education ought to be. However, it also helps us appreciate diversity in students, and challenge the idea that particular students serve to meet widening participation requirements or minority group quotas.

This appreciation of learners' differences brings also to mind that the university where the present research took place is now engaging with the findings from the research and the implications for enhancing praxis: for example, the internal dissemination of the findings led to discussions among senior academic to consider whether any unconscious biases and assumptions about their students might impact on their teaching practices; and reflect on how they were voicing their own views in discussions and providing room for different views.

The research identified areas of best practice, for example, an academic skills audit and support programme in one-degree programme which students felt spelt out previously hidden assumptions about how to write at university. There are now endeavours to spread such good practice further. These steps show how institutional change – may it be in small steps – is possible and indeed necessary for institutions to continually change in response to their students.

Disclosure statement

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