

Unpacking Class Unevenness in University Teaching: Deconstructing Hidden Curricula

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Abstract

Universities are usually identified as meritocratic institutions that reward efforts of talent regardless of their social origin. Yet underneath formal curricula and defined learning outcomes, a hidden curriculum operates, transmitting social norms, cultural codes, and behavioural expectations that systematically benefit students from middle and upper-class socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, this research attempts to examine how implicit pedagogical practices, linguistic conventions, assessment cultures, and socio-politico-spatial norms in higher education institutions perpetuate socio-economic divides. By employing Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital and Paulo Freire's framework of critical pedagogy, the paper analyses three key sites of class unevenness: the unspoken expectations of educational discourse, the deficit of low-income rural-class experience in prescribed curricula, and the performative norms embedded in classroom participation culture. The present research proposes selected critical pedagogical interventions, including dialogical teaching, reflexive curriculum design, and culturally responsive assessment mechanisms that educators could adopt to dismantle mechanisms of hidden curricula. The deficit of rural-peri-urban background students' experiences result in "objectification" that refers to the experiences of rural/peri-urban students perceiving their own communities as merely objects of study rather than sources of knowledge.

The argument is not merely emphasizing universities to acknowledge socio-economic diversity, but there should be an active reconstruction of their pedagogical architectures that recognise, validate, and build upon the diverse knowledge that all students bring with them.

Keywords: hidden curriculum, class unevenness, critical pedagogy, cultural capital, higher education, Bourdieu, Freire, socio-economic equity, habitus.

1. Introduction

Higher education has long been demonstrating a key role in the liberal democratic imagination as a source of social mobility, a space of intellectual emancipation, and a pathway that allows talent to rise unconstrained by birth. Yet large sociological and educational research has exacerbated complications to the higher education institutions (HEI's). Students who reach the Universities with working-class backgrounds are typically faced not only with a curriculum of subject knowledge, but a curriculum of social compartmentalization. The question arises that it is usually not recognized by the planners, designers, and not understood by the receivers.

The hidden curriculum is the unspoken curriculum (unintentional lessons and values taught) that seeks conformity and obedience by students while they are at school, Philip Jackson (1968) studied in his research of elementary school life: norms of deference and self-presentation, ideas about intellectual independence and conventions of academic voice and register. The hidden dimensions are integral to higher education in uneven socio-political conditions, where students are expected to be self-governing adults thus failures to attain good outcomes are often attached to their individual's ability or efforts instead of disadvantage.

This paper attempts to unpack a few observed dimensions of hidden curriculum in university teaching as a class-coded artefact. Historically built, and tactfully used by educated middle and upper class to various advantages, It operates in a combination of norms, conventions and expectations that continues to serve as unspoken mechanisms of cultural gatekeeping. The paper analyzes four substantive sections: a theoretical basis on Bourdieu and Freire; three main locations of class unevenness (inequity) in university teaching; a brief overview of critical pedagogical interventions and a commentary on institutional conditions for the effective implementation of reform.

The research would attempt to investigate through the research question as given below.

Research Question:

How does the hidden curriculum in universities reinforce socio-economic class unevenness

through tacit pedagogical practices, linguistic conventions, assessment cultures and classroom participation norms?

2. Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu, Freire, and the Pedagogy

This paper utilizes two theoretical constructs for analysis. The first one is Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of education, specifically focussing on "Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Education valorizes the dominant class's habitus, a system of durable, transposable dispositions that structure perception, thought and action. The educational institutions operate in a way to reproduce it by praising the intellectual merit of class advantage. The cultural capital builds upon cultural knowledge, competencies and credentials acquired in the family and formal educational socialization. It functions as the currency with which this process works.

The university is not a neutral field for Bourdieu. It is organized by the rules of the game '*illusio*' which are readily understood by the middle-class intellectuals however, neither understood by others nor socialized in their intellectual culture. The students who intuitively know how to speak to a professor and the way to critical engagement in a seminar and how to take his voice in writing for description to analysis. It is not necessarily that it rests on typical wisdom than those students who don't know such things. They hold a kind of cultural capital that is embodied and the institutions equate it with academic skills. In the terminology of Bourdieu, the hidden curriculum consists of the array of implicit and structured ways by which cultural capital is converted into academic distinction.

The second tradition is the critical pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire as described in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). Bourdieu provides a sociology of reproduction and Freire offers a philosophy of liberation. Freire critiques on the banking model of education, where students are treated as empty vessels into which authoritative knowledge is poured, is quite powerful in terms of the class dynamics of the hidden curriculum. In such instances, universities impose tacit norms without explicit mention, and various procedures punish students without already embodying these norms, so it imposes a kind of symbolic violence that precludes critical consciousness.

Thus dialogical education of Freire provides the normative basis for the prescriptions in this research paper, because it is based on identifying factors that occur in the experience of the learner.

Critical pedagogy can not immediately add to the curriculum, but rather it seeks to reposition the pedagogical relationship, bringing to the fore the knowledge and lived experience of the learner as a resource rather than a deficit. Freire (1970), “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” introduces critical pedagogy, emphasizes dialogical teaching by dismantling oppressive educational structures. Therefore, it focuses more on schooling and community education than on universities’ hidden curricula.

Brief Literature Gap

Recent studies on hidden curricula (e.g., mentoring, tacit knowledge) largely focus on inequality but do not systematically connect these practices to class unevenness in academic discourse, curricula and participation norms. While prior scholarship has critiqued the myth of meritocracy in higher education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Freire, 1970) and identified hidden curricula in specific contexts (e.g., mentoring in graduate education). Integration of Bourdieu and Freire remains underdeveloped in higher education research, leaving a gap this study tends to address by combining symbolic domination (Bourdieu) with dialogical pedagogy (Freire). The classic text shows how education legitimizes social hierarchies through symbolic domination and cultural capital. It only critiques meritocracy but does not explicitly theorize hidden curricula in contemporary university teaching. Margolis, E., & Romero, M. (2020) The scholarly literature lacks due to insufficient theoretical and empirical evidence that could systematically examine how implicit pedagogical practices, linguistic conventions and classroom participation norms reproduce socio-economic unevenness/divides in universities teaching. This study specifically addresses the identified gap by integrating Bourdieu’s sociology of reproduction linking with Freire’s critical pedagogy to analyze sites of class unevenness and proposing reviewed interventions.

3. Three Sites of Class Unevenness in University Teaching

3.1 Academic Discourse and Linguistic Capital

Academic Discourse Question:

How do unspoken expectations around academic language, rhetorical style and disciplinary discourse privilege students with middle- and upper-class cultural capital and marginalize those from working-class or rural backgrounds?

In the light of academic discourse, the ground which is the least recognized form of class differences in university teaching is perhaps the field of academic language. The registers, genres, and rhetorical conventions of academic discourse are not natural and universal but rather historically produced through specific intellectual culture. But universities regularly regard knowledge in these linguistic conventions as a measure of intelligence or devotion instead of previous socialisation.

The vocabulary, patterns of argumentation, and norms of citing that are required for academic writing are likely to be familiar to students raised in families with high educational capital, much like the vocabulary they already know, thanks to dinner-table discussion, recreational reading, and family cultural traditions. First-generation university students, by contrast, frequently encounter academic discourse as a foreign language, for which no systematic instruction is provided because it is assumed to be already known (Reay, 2001). The common feedback includes such as 'needs more critical analysis', 'argument lacks structure', 'write in a more academic register' presupposes having access to a metalanguage (academic practice) that they have never been taught.

This deficit is compounded by the hidden evaluative norms of classroom participation. Seminar cultures in many universities reward confident verbal performance, the ready marshalling of theoretical frameworks, and the ability to speak with authority under conditions of spontaneous intellectual debate. These are skills cultivated by years of middle-class socialisation dinner parties, family debates, private school debating societies not by the lived experience of low-income rural-class students, who may have been socialised into different but equally valid epistemic cultures.



3.2 The Invisible Low Income Rural-Class in Curricula

Curricular Exclusions and Invisible Rural back Ground:

Why does the prescribed curriculum fail to incorporate the lived experiences, knowledge systems, and socio-political realities of low-income or rural-class students, thereby reinforcing deficit perspectives?

In light of the above question, the second site of class unevenness could be seen in the prescribed content of the universities. Across disciplines from literature to management studies, from governance and public policy to economics, the canonical texts, particular cases, and selective reference points of university curricula are predominantly centered around middle and upper-class cultural norms and experience, leading to knowledge production. The deficit of rural-peri-urban background students' experiences result in "objectification" that refers to the experiences of rural/peri-urban students perceiving their own communities as merely objects of study rather than sources of knowledge.

This curricular absence has concrete socio-psychological and intellectual consequences. Students without seeing their experiences, communities, and specific epistemic traditions demonstrate that the curriculum embodies an implicit message: that knowledge is something produced about other things elsewhere, by others. This is what Moll et al. (1992) describe as a "failure to recognise students' funds of knowledge" the cultural and intellectual resources that students bring from their particular communities and could provide as powerful platforms for academic elevation.

This widespread absence of low-income rural-class experience is not merely an omission, but it is constitutive of disciplinary identity formation. Thus, adding a low-income rural-class author to a reading list or a case study drawn from a low-income rural-class community is partially useful but largely insufficient. The critical task is to investigate why canonical knowledge looks the way it does, whose perspectives it systematically excludes, and how the standards judge academic work - originality, abstraction, universalisability encode particular class-based epistemologies.

3.3 Assessment Culture and the Performance of Competence

Participation Culture

How do performative norms in classroom participation (confidence of voice, assertive debate and familiarity with institutional codes) reproduce socio-economic unevenness/divides in perceived competence and academic success?

Assessment Practices

How do implicit criteria in assessment cultures (valuing originality, independent thinking or theoretical sophistication) structure class-coded assumptions that advantage students with greater cultural capital?

The above referred questions highlight the role of performative norms in classroom participation and criteria in assessment culture as the third site of class unevenness in assessment. While assessment is formally standardised and bound by explicit marking criteria, these criteria themselves embed class-coded assumptions about what good academic work looks like. The values of originality, independent thinking, and confident theoretical argumentation that are highlighted in assessment rubrics correspond well with students' habitus with high cultural capital. Crozier et al. (2008) have noted self-regulated learning of middle-class students as an assumption that students can self-manage their own learning, prepare longer assignments and search their supplementary resources without being explicitly instructed.

Time-pressured examinations are a disadvantage to students with heavier domestic responsibilities, more prevalent among students with lower incomes in rural areas. The hidden curriculum of assessment is also transmitted non-formally: students whose parents and siblings have gone to university are provided with plenty of guidance on what they should do, how they should respond to feedback, and how they should navigate the murky world of successful academic work. Students lacking this type of social capital find an evaluation path more complicated and without a roadmap.

4. Methodological Overview and Empirical Analysis:

The research utilizes thematic analysis for exploring norms, values, and hidden curricula that

contributes class unevenness in university education. Therefore, it might help researchers to go beyond a surface-level analysis of curricula to reveal norms, values, and expectations that are implicit in the practices of academics. Thematic analysis extracts common themes from the codes, revealing the socio-economic hierarchies to which the institutional structures and pedagogical conventions conform, identifying possible areas of agency, assertiveness, and transformation. This approach is both methodologically sound and insightful, and provides a critical perspective on the mechanism of class bias within the mundane practices of everyday teaching and assessment. The selective purposive sampling was adopted to collect first-hand responses from university students studying their Bachelor's degree final semester from the National University of Modern Languages (NUML). The sample of respondents comprises three female students and five male students with differentiated socio-economic backgrounds and socio-cultural capital. The qualitative semi-structured interviews with 8 respondents detailed interviews for exploratory study [n=8; f=3, m=5] students at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad. Participants were selected through purposive convenient sampling to represent diversity in socio-economic background, geographic origin (urban/rural), and first-generation university status. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework of thematic analysis assigned codes as the first step of thematic analysis. The second step was generating themes and sub-themes to interpret respondents' responses. Then, finally, report writing to explain the empirical findings of the research.

Initial open coding was followed by pattern coding, with emerging themes systematically mapped onto the study's theoretical constructs including Bourdieu's concepts of “habitus and cultural capital” and Freire's “critical pedagogy”. The analysis proceeded deductively through three pre-theorised sites of class unevenness: academic discourse, curriculum content and assessment culture, while remaining open to inductively emergent sub-themes from participants' narratives. Phase 1 involved open coding of raw interview excerpts, generating initial codes such as 'unexplained academic expectations', 'curricular invisibility', and 'domestic burden in assessment'. Phase 2 categorised the codes into sub-themes, per site. The final stage (Phase 3) was writing the final thematic narratives in the Claim–Evidence–Analysis–Implication format. To enhance credibility, member checking and reflexive bracketing were used.

Code	Gender	Socio-Economic Background	Urban/Rural Origin	First-Generation Student	Study Programme	Year
P1	Male	Low-middle income	Peri-Urban	No	Governance and Public Policy	Final
P2	Male	Middle-income	Peri-urban	Yes	Governance and Public Policy	Final
P3	Male	Low-middle income	Rural	No	Governance and Public Policy	Final
P4	Male	Low-middle income	Peri-urban	Yes	Governance and Public Policy	Final
P5	Male	Middle income	Rural	Yes	Governance and Public Policy	Final
P6	Female	Low-middle income	Peri-urban	Yes	Governance and Public Policy	Final
P7	Female	Low-middle income	Urban	No	Governance and Public Policy	Final
P8	Female	Low income	Rural	No	Governance and Public Policy	Final

Table 1. Table of Respondents

5. Results

Three analytical sites were noted for five themes that were linked together. These themes do not exist in isolation but are interwoven into a series of mechanisms that create and perpetuate class-based disadvantage in higher education.

Theme 1: The Linguistic Capital; Academic Discourse as a Class-Coded Gateway

Claim

Academic language is not a skill taught at universities, but is assumed as a prior competency of students. This assumption normalises the language from educationally privileged homes and stigmatises the language use of students from the first generation and low-income families.

Evidence

Pupils' accounts of a mismatch between the language and the resources they may use were

regularly reported. One participant was very clear in summarizing this:

P1 and P2 rural and prei-urban background with low middle income responded to a question about unspoken expectations in the classroom "Always heard and read word critically by the teachers in multiple interactions but hardly deciphered true meaning from such expressions" It was indicative of unevenness in learning experience by weak cultural capital among low socioeconomic background.

The unspoken expectations from the students that they will arrive with the requisite knowledge of how to 'think critically' thus not being taught what that term means. It was rather experienced by students with low socioeconomic background as a teaching omission, considering as an assumption that the academically fluent already knew that, and those that lack it are deficient, as a class signal. It is often appeared as gap that exacerbated due to non bridging of the feedback,

P7 and P8 rural and urban background with low middle and middle income responded to a question about unspoken norms of the classroom" Whenever a teacher remarks that includes the word 'lacks' does not help me to improve."

In this response it shows that unspoken classroom hierarchies are entrenched due to the absence of explicit scaffolding in academic discourse of higher education institutions. One P3 respondent gave a thorough account of the social functioning of linguistic dominance:

" There were "unspoken rules and norms clearly dividing different experiences of different students based on gender tension, curriculum tension... The rules were created to declare some students as confident to dominate, and others just sit quietly."

Analysis

The experiences themselves embody Bourdieu's (1986) notion of linguistic capital, which refers to the ability to speak the dominant registers of language and it is an inherited cultural asset that is unevenly distributed among social classes. For Bourdieu, the university is a space where various types of capital are recognized and rewarded. It is, therefore, academic language may not be seen as a priori universal medium, but rather a class-coded field of practice sanctioning to the cultural weight of educated, middle and high income households.

Students who develop habitus outside of school contexts usually reach the university with the tacit

linguistic codes that some have picked up from family socialisation. It reinforces 'feel for the game' that Bourdieu describes as cultural capital. The university's reluctance to state these codes explicitly points to Freire's (1970) "banking model of education" in which knowledge is deposited in students. Because they are expected to be passive recipients embracing a ready-made intellectual culture instead of being active agents in their own right.

The hidden curriculum of academic discourse, therefore, functions as an invisible filter; people with fluency are not marked as deficient in their language, but others are described deficient due to language barrier.

Implication

The hidden curriculum of language is one of the most powerful, yet most invisible machines of class reproduction in higher education. The invisibility of its naturalisation is the reason to turn it invisible. It is not a class specific practice but rather a universal standard. In order to reform institutions, there is a need to rewrite the code, making it explicit, by creating structured academic literacy development, clear assessment criteria and pedagogical approaches that validate use of different communicative repertoires without showing any bias.

Theme 2: Rural and Low-Income Experience as Invisible Curricula

Claim

The lived experiences, community knowledge, and epistemological frameworks of low-income, rural students are systematically ignored and rendered invisible in university curricula, such that the community that is being studied is the source of legitimate knowledge and the subject of the study is the background.

Evidence

Winners from the rural and peri-urban areas consistently said that there was no connection between the content of the course and their social realities. P5 and P6 talked about a time of non-recognition:

"I found out in my university experience that I have been mostly misunderstood based upon peers' perceptions due to history, identity and social values. The institutional mechanisms denying any channel to get redressal was another problem. All examples are from big cities, corporates, elite families making me a nonrecognized person."

The P4 shared his experience of curricular erasure which was compounded by the devaluation of community-based knowledge:

"What I know from my community feels worthless here because the prescribed syllabus did not reflect my experience of knowledge. The subjective sensitivities of different students hardly matched with prescribed content."

Particularly P7 expressed striking observation that the curriculum's relationship to marginalised experience was that of a researcher to a subject — studying these communities rather than learning with or from them:

"The problem is that what we study in prescribed course content is completely disconnected, turning them as objects of study (Objectification), not the people's lived experiences of what they are made to study."

The educational biography of one participant P1 further illustrated how structural instability (itself a product of class) produced knowledge that curricula are entirely unequipped to engage:

"Early academic life is replete with many experiments... Being a descendant of a politically active father, I sought extensive education, turning into a bumpy schooling track for me... it resulted in finding out strange class codes in which I started university learning with various emotional experiences."

Analysis

The findings are in consonance with Moll et al.'s (1992) description of the term “Funds of Knowledge framework”, which holds that low-, middle-, and working-class families have deep stores of knowledge and understandings (practical, historical, cultural and relational) that are continually ignored and underrated by schools and universities. These cultural landmarks in the community are interpreted as absences rather than cognitive and epistemological resources.

Bourdieu's notion of the habitus helps explain the structural aspect of such exclusion. The culture of rural, first-generation students, who learned through first hand knowledge on farming practices, survival skills, interdependence in communities and oral language. It appears to be in conflict with the implicit valuation of urbanised, middle-class, text-based knowledge in the academic field. This imbalance is demonstrated as lacking, not as an injustice.

Freire (1970) has identified one of the key characteristics of dominant educational systems, silencing instead of engaging the epistemological discourses of oppressed/invisible communities. The 'object of study' (objectification) dynamic, which participant P1 described as 'students from the margins learning texts about the margins', is a very stark example of what Freire called the 'culture of silence'.

Implication

The lack of inclusion of the experiences of low socioeconomic rural communities can not be explained as an insufficient content issue, but a structural issue, reflecting whose knowledge is valued and whose not. In order to address this, there needs to be a paradigm shift in the way the curriculum is designed. It can begin from representation and introduction of 'diverse examples' to include epistemic inclusion by drawing on students' "Funds of Knowledge" as a legitimate resource for academic inquiry.

Theme 3: Class Performance, Competence, and Participatory Norms

Claim

The norms for participation in class and in a seminar becomes the criteria of verbal confidence and the rules of interaction among fellow students are all class-coded performances. It benefits only such students who have been educated and socialized in a way to perform it in expected ways.

Evidence

The participants P1 P6 P8 students reported Classrooms were actually social fields organized by inequalities of social and cultural capital. Where the holders of specific social and cultural capital held dominant roles in academic performativity.

"The students with social capital seem to know how to behave in seminars, we kept quiet and just watched."

The limits of acceptable speech and behaviour were never described as explicit rules as such, but rather as a tacit class code, which was picked up intuitively by some students forcing others seeing from the outside:

"Teachers mostly expect us to speak fluently but we never had that back home."

Analysis

The concept of the field of Bourdieu (1984) is central here. The university seminar is a space termed a social field with its own rules of the game, its own *illusio*, which are not expressed but to be internalized. Students from privileged backgrounds enter the university with specific dispositions required to do academic work, as they grow up in environments with the same participatory norms as those of private schooling, dinner-table debates and extracurricular oratory. Such norms of participation act as symbolic violence in the sense because they impose a social code specific to a class as though a universal standard of academic seriousness for first-generation students. It works in silence, as well as in words, the disciplining of non-dominant voices.

Freire's dialogic pedagogy provides an alternative, a classroom should not be organized around multiple voices of the dominant culture, but rather organized around multiple epistemological standpoints, one of which is "silence", which may not be a sign of lack of intelligence, but of power.

Implication

If pedagogies adopt participatory approaches and remove all types of the class coded nature of participation, then they may address inequity in classrooms. Pedagogical reforms should work towards conditions where multiple modes of participation are respected, and where speaking power is not something that is passed down, but it is truly given.

Theme 4: Assessment as a Class-Coded Filter

Claim

Assessment systems reinforce inequity within the classroom through favouring certain ways of assessment. In a way, students likely to have parents' support in their educational tasks, paid work and generational guidance/supervision grant them an advantageous position to succeed with doing assessment.

Evidence

The structural challenges of assessment were grouped under three sub-themes:

Structural disadvantages. It unfolds conflict of assessment demands and material conditions in life. The participants P2 P6 responded about assessment demands and linking with material conditions of life;

"We work part-time, so timebound exams are really hard for us to prepare for exams without any

distraction."

P6 responded in words; "I have three younger siblings at home, I can't self-study like others to prepare for exams."

Second structural challenge includes, that the transfer of 'tricks of the trade' that are not available to first generation students:

P6 P4 responded in their words; "Students whose parents went to university better know tricks which we don't."

Thirdly, a culture of marking that equates confidence, theoretical fluency and understanding:

P2 responded in his words; "Teachers reward confidence and theory but I know the content not the "standards performance."

Analysis

This is directly connected to Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural reproduction. The assessment is fundamentally a subjective evaluation of academic achievement. And it needs an objective measure of academic achievement, which is a measure of endorsement of dominant academic culture. There is a tacit practice that first-generation students miss out on as the non-academic 'tricks' too. (the way to navigate the pressure of a test, the way to write to authority, to pose with certainty, to sound like an educated adult)

Assessment systems assume a "free learner" with no caring responsibilities, free of the constraints of part-time work and able to study in a setting that is ideal for the student. Therefore, there is a problem with such an "ideal assessment" for low-socioeconomic background students with low level of domestic freedom and heavy burden of caring responsibilities. This ideal could not be neutral; it's a class fiction that becomes the universal norm for student life, the middle class.

It would be Freire's (1970) understanding of the concrete dimension of the banking model that promotes the ability to reproduce a body of knowledge in a predetermined way. It obstructs the way of thinking critically from one's own position. The student who 'knows the content but not the performance' has understood but could not perform the class script and thus assessed as such.

Implication

The reforms of assessment must be directly linked to the material conditions of students' life. This means that assessment forms are varied, and the question of what may be assessed under what conditions of possibility could not be taken for granted when put to the test. These findings reflect institutional responses such as the application of the principles of Universal Design for Learning, contextual assessment and explicit preparation of the conventions of learning should be integral components of possible assessment reforms.

Theme 5: Student Agency, Resistance, and Navigational Strategies

Claim

The power of the hidden curriculum to reproduce classes is great, but students are not its passive victims. The data shows a range of critical awareness, ways of negotiating and new emerging methods of resistance (*conscientização*) in which students challenge and partly negotiate the situation of their marginalisation Hunaepi et al. (2024).

Evidence

Students' responses showed high levels of understanding, but sometimes painful how the class is organised. The recognition of 'unspoken rules' of the classroom despite being subject to these indicates a form of critical consciousness.

P1 P3 P6 responded in a way; "As soon as you recognise unspoken rules in the classroom you realise that your performance is challenged due to invisible toxicity insulating under these rules."

The assertion of oneself as a subject who has a history and refuses to be erased. Thus naming oneself as a nonrecognized person is the very act of articulating one's erasure is a refusal of that erasure. Likewise, the students who employ a navigability between distinct school systems and institutional cultures depict a resistant adaptability that is not noted in the academic field but nonetheless exhibits real epistemic labour.

Analysis

The analytical lens of Freire's idea of "*conscientização*" helps us explain critical consciousness that comes from the naming of one's oppression. Students' skills to recognise, explain and "do" a reflexive analysis of why they are marginalized is not just a mere survival skill, it is in fact the prerequisite for transformative action, whether personal or collective.

However, Bourdieu (1984) has recognized such people who have agency in the field and that can become “reflexive of the game” they are playing, which in turn opens up if they are open to some even if there is not a significant space present for strategic manoeuvre. The navigational approaches reflected in the data (code switching, reference to dominant norms, critical reflection on institutional culture) are just such limited but genuine reflections of agency.

Implication

Critical consciousness of students could turn their experiences into a pedagogical resource and not a sign of disadvantage. The structural change is more likely to result in meaningful change likely to occur when institutional responses engage students as co-analysts of educational inequity, through participatory research, student-led curriculum review, and dialogical pedagogy than institutions treating students as objects of intervention.

6. Conclusions

This analysis has helped establish that there are three mutually interdependent sites of the hidden curriculum in higher education in Pakistan. It operates as an academic discourse, curriculum content and assessment culture which systematically privileges students’ habitus, cultural capital and material conditions endorsing unspoken norms of academic field. The five themes identified linguistic penalty, curricular invisibility, participation as class performance, assessment as class filter, and student navigational agency collectively constitute a coherent and mutually reinforcing mechanism of cultural reproduction resulting in class unevenness.

A key finding helps to go beyond previous literature’s focus (mentoring, tacit knowledge) that highlight inequality but do not systematically connect these practices to class unevenness in discourse, curricula, and participation norms. The empirical analysis illustrates the specific articulation of ‘objectification,’ the experience of seeing one’s own community treated as the object of academic study rather than as a source of academic knowledge. (Giroux, 1983). This dynamic appears as an outcome of empirical analysis demonstrating, it is particularly acute in the Pakistani context, where rural and peri-urban student populations are often researched by the same institutional culture that excludes them.

It is based upon my few years of teaching experience with students from different socio-economic

backgrounds at the NUML University that the hidden curriculum operates in an implicit way. The hidden curriculum of higher education is not a marginal or incidental feature of university life. But it's a central mechanism through which class advantages are transmitted, naturalised and reproduced under the notion of merit. Its exposure requires the tools of critical social theory, particularly Bourdieu's account of symbolic violence and Freire's account of *conscientisation*. It calls forth sustained commitment of educators who are willing to turn a critical gaze upon their own routine practices to deconstruct mechanisms of hidden curriculum.

The findings of study highlights that class unevenness operates at three principal sites in university teaching; in the norms of academic discourse, in the content and framing of the curriculum, and in the design and evaluation of assessment. At each site, critical pedagogical interventions are available, but their effectiveness depends upon institutional commitment as well as individual commitment. There is evidence of student agency and critical consciousness has been registered in the empirical analysis of students' navigational techniques. The hidden curriculum is not all powerful; students resist, adapt, observe and name. Therefore, pedagogical transformation is a major asset in this critical awareness which, if not disregarded, could be offered by the institution as a resource. Thus the ultimate goal is not to lower standards, but to shift the definition of standards, from being the ones the privileged have built in the course of their lives, to the ones that embrace intellectual engagement, critical thinking and knowledge production of all, regardless of their socio-economic status. Yosso, T. J. (2005) It is not a gesture of humanity towards the unprivileged. It is a form of epistemic justice towards the production of knowledge.

7. Recommendations

The recommendations are directed at three aspects of institutional responsibility: Curriculum design, Pedagogy, and institutional policy.

7.1 Curriculum Restructuring

- Systematic review of current curricula to identify socioeconomic, geographic, and cultural assumptions found in case studies, examples, and theoretical frameworks.

- Include Funds of Knowledge in curriculum design; intentionally seeking out and developing the community-based knowledge, hands-on skills, and experiences that students bring from family and lived environments in low-resource communities.
- Create inclusive reading lists and course materials that recognize, value, and include knowledge production by the rural working-class.
- Global South scholars and communities are not just subjects of study. Make sure that examples in the course content reflect a variety of socioeconomic and geographic settings (not just urban, corporate, or elite).

7.2 Pedagogical Interventions

- Establish explicit and structured academic literacy development in subject disciplines — make academic writing, critical analysis and participation in seminars skills to be taught, not assumed.
- Offer detailed rubrics, examples of student work, and formative feedback that communicate abstract academic goals into tangible, specific feedback.
- Diversify assessment forms to minimize the use of timed tests and written papers as the only methods of determining academic skills and incorporate oral, project, collaborative and portfolio assessments.
- Establish opportunities for dialogical pedagogy (seminar, collaborative inquiry, peer discussion) that are structured in a way that multiple forms of participation are valued, and the authority to participate is actively distributed.
- Recognise and support students with caring, household and work duties and opportunities for flexible assessment submission arrangements.

7.3 Institutional Policy and Reforms

- Implement 'first generation' student support initiatives, which extend financial support to the academic cultural capital gap through mentoring from first generation graduates, peer networks and critical academic skills development.
- Institute academic staff training in critical pedagogy and awareness of hidden curriculum; unmask the unspoken class codes of academic culture, and challenge and change them.

- Establish processes for participatory research and create student advisory panels, co-design processes, and student-led review of curriculum to empower students from marginalized backgrounds to be co-analysts and co-designers of institutional change.
- Ensure that systematic data collection on the relations between socioeconomic status and academic attainment is carried out on an institutional level with special focus on assessment performance, drop out and participation patterns.
- Engage in policy dialogue with higher education regulators to revise accreditation standards to include equity and hidden curriculum indicators as dimensions of institutional quality.

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