

Imperial Legacies, Hidden Power, and the Racialisation of UK Education Policy

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Abstract

This article analyses how various forms of power shape education policymaking in the UK, focusing on the legacy of imperialism in legitimising racial hierarchies. Using the Power Cube framework, it explores the dynamic interplay of visible, hidden, and invisible forms of power across different policy spaces and levels. The article examines three key areas: the imperial roots of compulsory education, the 1988 Education Reform Act's national curriculum and agenda-setting, and contemporary education policies alongside ongoing decolonisation efforts. It argues that hidden forms of power, operating through agenda-setting and the hidden curriculum, have been most influential in perpetuating systemic racism within the

education system. Grassroots activism in claimed spaces challenges these structures, advocating for a more inclusive and anti-racist curriculum. To conclude, I emphasise the need for racial literacy policies and collective efforts to dismantle imperial ideologies embedded in education policymaking, fostering equity and social justice in UK education.

Introduction

The legacy of British imperialism continues to structure contemporary secondary education policy, shaping both overt decisions and hidden agendas that reinforce racial hierarchies. The use of hidden forms of power has the greatest influence, operating through subtle mechanisms of agenda-setting. Using the power cube theory to deepen my analysis, I will explore three key areas, examining the interplay of forms, spaces, and levels of power. Firstly, the influence of imperial power in Britain, which shaped the foundations of compulsory education. Secondly, The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), specifically the national curriculum, and its use of hidden power through agenda-setting and the “hidden curriculum”. Thirdly, current education policies and ongoing decolonising efforts in education, particularly in claimed spaces, and their overall impact. Finally, I will consider the future of education policy, exploring the most effective forms, spaces and levels of power that encourage anti-racism.

Theoretical Framework: Power Cube

The Power Cube identifies three forms, spaces, and levels of power (respectively): visible, hidden, invisible; local, national, global; and, closed, invited, claimed. This essay's focus will be on the forms of power which interact dynamically within educational contexts, shaping policy outcomes in complex ways. Visible power, as argued by Dahl (1957), constitutes decision-making within a formal political arena, and in an educational context this would be the formation of education policy. According to Bachrach and Baratz (1963), hidden forms of power, unlike visible forms of power, involve agenda-setting or non-decision-making. Agenda-setting is crucial for education policy as it determines the contents of the national curriculum. Invisible power, on the other hand, shapes societal norms and values (Lukes 1986). In education, this can manifest as unconscious bias pertaining to certain groups of students, which has the potential to influence policy decisions without explicit discussion.

The interplay between these forms of power is critical. Hidden power can reinforce visible power structures and vice versa. Analysing these interactions reveals how power dynamics in education policy are more nuanced than they appear; this is essential for developing effective strategies that address educational inequalities. It highlights the need to look beyond traditional policy-making processes while considering the more implicit forms of power (Cox 2011). Furthermore, it demands

a critical assessment of the values that underpin policy decisions, acknowledging that seemingly neutral policies can have differential impacts on marginalised communities.

Imperial Roots of UK Education Policy

During Britain's imperial era (1815-1914), hidden forms of power profoundly shaped the UK education policymaking process, legitimising racism within the system's foundations (Cole 2004), notably exhibited within the 1870 Education Act. While aimed at improving literacy and providing education to all children, it served as a vehicle for perpetuating imperial ideologies and racial hierarchies (Bushby 1988). As the basis for the proliferation of UK mass education, this Act laid the groundwork for the use of education in creating an "imperial race" and raising "national efficiency" (Cole 2004). W.E. Forster, the Vice-President of the Education department under Gladstone, argued that education was imperative in maintaining Britain's global position and power (Maclure 1979).

This rhetoric reveals how hidden power in the form of imperial ideology and racism was embedded in the education system from its inception. The focus on "imperial race" and "national efficiency" not only legitimised but also naturalised racial hierarchies. Its underlying motivations were subtly influenced by imperial ideologies which legitimised racial hierarchy and racism within education (Cole 2004). This illustrates how hidden power in policymaking can shape institutions to maintain

power structures without obvious enforcement. Critically, Cole's (2004) analysis, while insightful, is written from a radical perspective; a more nuanced perspective might acknowledge the genuine concerns around national competitiveness that also motivated the Act, despite perpetuating harmful ideologies.

The 1988 Education Reform Act and Agenda-Setting in the Curriculum

Since the 1870 Education Act, there had been several notable reforms within education policy, namely the 1944 Butler Act, the 1976 Education Act, and the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). The 1988 ERA fundamentally reshaped the distribution of power within the education system, transferring power from local to national levels enabling the government full control over the content of the education curriculum (Maclure 1989). This centralisation of power facilitated the legitimisation of racism within the curriculum (Gillborn 2008), which was more about what was absent from the curriculum, rather than what was included – agenda setting. Gillborn (2008, p.74) argues that the national curriculum had “no meaningful acknowledgment of race/ethnic diversity” and promoted a very ethnocentric curriculum (this is another example of agenda-setting).

This observation presents a prominent example of hidden power according to Bachrach and Baratz's (1963) definition. By actively excluding people of colour (POC) from the curriculum, Thatcher took a colour-blind approach to education policy, refusing to acknowledge the important histories and experiences of POC in education. This “systematically down-plays the legacies and

current manifestations of institutional racism” (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014, p. 148), pushing a certain agenda onto school students. However, as with the 1870 Education Act, the 1988 ERA aimed to improve overall education quality, with standardised curricula and tests intended to improve educational outcomes (Maclure 1989), not necessarily to disadvantage POC students. Despite this, its implementation revealed hidden forms of power shaping the policymaking process. Without acknowledging racial and ethnic diversity, as noted by Gillborn (2008), it implicitly reinforced existing racial hierarchies and power structures within the education system. The insidious perpetuation of institutional racism demonstrates how hidden forms of power can operate within seemingly harmless policy reforms, shaping educational outcomes in ways that are not immediately apparent but can have long-lasting impacts on marginalised communities. Furthermore, the focus on standardised testing may disproportionately disadvantage students from marginalised backgrounds who face systemic barriers to academic success (Gilborn 2008).

The Marxist perspective on the hidden curriculum offers a critical framework for understanding how education policy can perpetuate racial hierarchies. The hidden curriculum, as defined by Bowles and Gintis (1975), acts as a tool of social reproduction, legitimising dominant ideologies and social structures. In the context of education policy, the hidden curriculum can subtly instil students with imperial ideologies, whilst teaching them to be subservient to authority. Within the hidden curriculum, certain narratives are explicitly taught, while others are actively omitted – this creates a selective history which can perpetuate a colourblind approach to education. This form of

hidden power within education policymaking could reinforce invisible power, covertly manifesting unconscious biases among students. As Pennant (2022) notes, the consequences of this have been profound, with black female students facing racist stereotypes within the classroom, as well as facing low teacher expectations.

British Values and the Continuation of Hidden Power

There is an underlying assumption in policymaking that the status quo must be maintained (Gillborn 2009). The 1988 ERA has been the dominant education policy for the last 40 years and has continued to uphold traditional values, especially in the national curriculum. David Cameron's Coalition Government maintained traditional, imperial values through his education policies. For example, "British Values", following on from the "Prevent" strategy in 2011, aimed to emphasise democratic principles within the education system (Department for Education 2014). The selection of which values are deemed "British" acts as a form of hidden power, subtly imposing a specific cultural framework, while marginalising others. This agenda-setting normalises certain values and worldviews at the expense of others, thus reinforcing dominant, imperial ideology. However, as argued by the Department for Education and Lord Nash (2014), the initial aim of the policy was to "ensure children become valuable and fully rounded members of society who treat others with respect and tolerance, regardless of backgrounds" – suggesting that British values were framed as a mean to foster inclusivity, democratic principles, and societal cohesion. It is imperative to note, however, that framing the promotion of these values under the guise of protecting schools from

extremism served to further alienate minority communities. Ironically, “British Values” were introduced without proper public discourse or a pragmatic democratic process, emerging as a byproduct of counter-terrorism policy (Farrell 2023). Moreover, Farrell (2023) argues that The Coalition Government “weaponised Anglican Christianity as a symbol of British values and national identity” by equating British Values with Christian values (p. 44). While they attempted to promote ‘tolerance’ of other religions and beliefs they were implicitly pushing their own traditional, Christian values onto the curriculum – a form of hidden power (agenda-setting). Furthermore, Vincent (2019) posits that the British Values policy excludes and marginalizes those who do not conform to these constructed norms – this can reinforce racism and racial hierarchies within education. Ergo, using British values as a form of hidden power legitimises racism within education policymaking. This policy, therefore, epitomises how seemingly inoffensive policies can subtly create unequal power dynamics.

Claimed Spaces, Grassroots Resistance and Dismantling Hidden Power

Despite the ubiquity of hidden power in shaping policymaking, spaces for resistance and change have emerged, particularly through “claimed” spaces of power within education. These spaces represent grassroots efforts to challenge dominant ideologies and promote more inclusive curricula (Cox 2011), like The Black Curriculum. Founded in 2019, the Black Curriculum actively challenges Eurocentric education policy (such as the national curriculum) in a claimed space (The Black Curriculum, n.d.). This direct action is crucial in education policy as it gives an opportunity for

marginalised voices to be heard. However, the national curriculum does include opportunities to teach about empire and colonialism in history¹. Therefore, there has been an effort to include diverse histories and address historical injustices. Yet, these topics are listed as “non-statutory”, this means that schools have the choice on how much emphasis they place on these topics – or whether to teach them at all. Here, the visible power of curriculum design is undermined by the hidden power of selective implementation, affording schools the option to avoid uncomfortable histories. This demonstrates how hidden power operates within education policymaking by allowing dominant narratives to persist (Cox 2011). Furthermore, this selective inclusion of history reflects how invisible power shapes societal norms and values by determining what is considered important knowledge. As argued by Gillborn (2008), this omission perpetuates a Eurocentric worldview that marginalises Black contributions to British History – reinforcing imperial ideologies. Hidden and invisible power thus work dialectically to legitimise dominant ideologies.

Given the pervasive influence of hidden power in shaping education policy and perpetuating racial hierarchies, future reforms must actively work to dismantle these structures. For example, a policy that teaches and encourages racial literacy among staff and students. Racial literacy refers to the skill of understanding “the ways in which race and racisms work in society”, while also having the capacity and means to challenge racism within yourself and others (Joseph-Salisbury 2020, p. 7).

This policy could challenge hidden forms of power that have historically shaped the curriculum by

¹ This would be under the “ideas, political power, industry and empire: Britain, 1745-1901” section of the history curriculum, where the Transatlantic Slave Trade is given as an example of what to study (Department for Education 2014)

explicitly acknowledging the complexities and nuances of the often-unspoken racial dynamics in education, decentring Eurocentric perspectives and allowing for a wider range of voices to be heard. Furthermore, understanding the colonial roots of racism will aid educators in understanding the importance of more diverse and inclusive education policy, specifically the national curriculum (Joseph-Salisbury 2020, p. 7).

Another effective education policy could be to diversify the national curriculum. Joseph-Salisbury (2020, p. 12) suggests creating an anti-racist curriculum that involves “showing how the history of modernity is shaped by racism, coloniality and white supremacy”. This can challenge the hidden curriculum and agenda-setting enacted within education policymaking by providing staff and students with the tools to critically analyse colonial power within UK institutions whilst receiving efficient and accurate race education. However, implementing such curricula changes could face further protest due to the entrenched nature of hidden forms of power within education. Additionally, it is important to consider how these policies are implemented across various levels of power, especially if teachers are under-prepared to teach it or if a policy altering the national curriculum is not implemented in tandem with a racial literacy policy (Joseph-Salisbury 2020). But, while national policy changes are crucial, the influence of local initiatives and school-level organisation cannot be overlooked. Cox (2011) argues that political action within claimed spaces of power gives voices to minoritised and marginalised communities. Ultimately, it is a contingent,

dynamic process and activists and researchers should have a level of flexibility when addressing forms of power in social issues and social change (Cox 2011).

Conclusion

To conclude, the interplay between visible policy decisions, hidden agenda-setting, and invisible ideological influences creates a complex and nuanced web of power relations that reinforce imperial and racial hierarchies through the education system; hidden forms of power have been the most influential overall. Starting from the 1870 Education Act, hidden power in the form of imperial ideology has impacted the education policymaking process, legitimising racism, and racial hierarchy within the education system. This was further reified through proceeding education policies such as the 1988 ERA and “British Values”.

Despite the institutionalisation of racism within education policy, there have been effective grassroots organisations aiming to decolonise the curriculum and education policy. However, there is still a lot of work to be done. The most effective way of creating this social change within education policy is through activism within claimed spaces of power, giving marginalised communities a platform and the capacity to effectively change education policy. These efforts to decolonise the curriculum would be enhanced by implementing a racial literacy policy for staff and students at schools so that they understand Britain’s colonial history and the pervasiveness of racism

within British institutions and are more confident in challenging institutional racism, racism within themselves and within others. Only then can we disrupt the reproduction of inequality and foster a truly equitable education system in which anti-racist policies are at the forefront.

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