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“What does learning sound like?”: Reverberations, Curriculum Studies, and Teacher Preparation

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“What does learning sound like?”: Reverberations, Curriculum Studies, and Teacher Preparation

Abstract

Using a project given to undergraduate students in a foundations of education course, this paper thinks through the assignment title, “What does learning sound like?” to explore the nexus of sound studies in education and curriculum studies. The central argument of this paper is that thinking through sound can be but one way for students to think through the forms of curriculum while examining their own bias in terms of Western privileging of the ocular.

Keywords

Sound studies, curriculum studies, teacher preparation

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Cover Page Footnote

My continued gratitude to Walter Gershon, whose mentoring and guidance has been central to my understanding of curriculum studies and sound studies.

"What does learning sound like?": Reverberations, Curriculum Studies, and Teacher Preparation



[Schooling Sound Off](#)

To hear this file, go to:
<http://boniwozolek.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/SchoolingSoundOff.mp3>



[Milkplash](#)

To hear this file, go to:
<http://boniwozolek.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Mothering-Redoux-4-4.mp3>

Every semester, I ask students in the educational foundations classes I teach to create a soundscape. The intent behind this project is for students to think about one question: What does learning sound like? Through this inquiry, students are encouraged to think critically about educational systems, their own understandings and experiences within those systems and, as necessary, the project itself. For example, I introduce the project by explicating how the field of sound studies has engaged in several debates about not just what a soundscape “is” but what it “does” across sonic understandings (e.g., Hagood, 2011; Ingold, 2008; Kelman, 2010; Schafer, 1969; Sterne, 2015). The parameters for the project are fairly open and, provided students receive consent prior to recording a specific person, I tell them that they can use any means they prefer to answer this question, with the caveat that they must turn in a collection of sounds since no images will be accepted. Every semester, I receive soundscapes with pencils scraping on paper, keyboards clacking furiously during Zoom calls, and a range of classroom sounds; from teachers working desperately to quiet the class, to the sound of one teacher reading a book with curious kids shifting in the background. After students are finished creating their soundscapes, we have a listening party. In what can only be described as a throwback to my childhood when I would sit on the floor, eagerly listening to my dad’s records, the students in my class are invited to enjoy pizza while huddling around laptops with soundscapes quietly playing. (Of course, with the COVID-19 related restrictions, I no longer offer refreshments and the format has changed slightly to encourage social distancing. We have, however, engaged in open dialogue about what these changes mean in terms of impacting sonic connections.) When they have finished listening deeply (Oliveros, 2005) to each other’s work, they record voice threads as a reaction that is sent to the student who composed the soundscape.

The discussion sparked from the initial listening party ranges from students explaining the process they followed when they decided which sounds to include, to a focus on the sounds that were most frequently represented during the listening party. When the conversation dies down, I explain that the description in the syllabus was intentionally vague since I posed only one question and left the rest of the project’s composition open to interpretation. Then, I pose two questions: “Which sounds were absent?” and, “How many sounds were recorded that did not come from schools?” The class usually falls silent. I follow up by asking, “Is the argument here that we only learn in schools?” This usually inspires more silence. After a moment, I play the

two soundscapes connected to the QR codes at the beginning of this paper and ask them to think together about what I've presented: What is learned through m/othering? What is learned through media?

The purpose of this activity is to serve as an entrée to the forms of curriculum—formal, enacted, hidden, and null—while thinking about schooling through sonic orientations. Engaging teacher candidates in these two dialogues is important for at least the following reasons. First, normalized violence is too often engendered and maintained when systems of schooling, including teacher education programs, only engage official forms of knowledge through the formal curriculum (Apple, 2014). As many curriculum theorists have argued (e.g., Cooper, 1892; Aoki, 1991; Berry & Stovall, 2013), attending to the nested and layered nature of curricula is critical to disrupting, resisting, and refusing sociopolitical and cultural violence. One only needs to consider how the null curriculum (Eisner, 1985; Tillett & Cushing-Leubner, 2021), or the voices absent from the intended (formal) lessons in school impact the hidden curriculum (Giroux & Penna, 1983; Wozolek, 2020), or the unintended lessons and values learned in all spaces, from the classroom to the corridor (Metz, 1978). The enacted curriculum (Page, 1991), or what is learned through social interactions, only further preserves broader sociocultural and political ideas and ideals. Why not, as Woodson (1933) asked, “exploit, enslave, or exterminate a class that everybody is taught to regard as inferior” (p. 3)? It is of little surprise that the very voices and sounds absent in students' soundscapes are the very voices and perspectives that are often devalued and dehumanized across educational contexts.

Second, western ideals of schooling continue to value ocular understandings over the sonic (Gershon, 2017). Subsequently, ocular ways of knowing in Western schools tend to be distilled to standardized testing, often elevating positivist approaches and quickly relegating the arts as superfluous “special” classes (Brown et al., 2016; Noblit et al., 2009). The act of listening deeply to what learning sounds like across contexts can interrupt students' relationships to visual ontoepistemologies (LaBelle, 2018). Additionally, when people engage in listening deeply to the movements of noise *and* what is heard when pauses are pregnant with possibility (Moten, 2003), often allows people to explore affective resonances they experience with/in the movement of sounds. In the case of this project, students often comment that they had not considered how ordinary affects (Stewart, 2007) are enmeshed with the sounds of learning. This last point is significant because many of the undergraduate students in this course explain that they had not considered how their presence while recording sounds is omni-directional in its affect, impacting them as they are impacting spaces, places, and people (Gershon, 2013).

Finally, at the nexus of sound and curriculum theory, I wish to encourage students to answer Luce Irigaray (1996) salient question that was later explored by Andra McCartney (2016): “How am I to listen to you” (p. 54)? This reflexive question asks both the listener and the speaker to engage openly, actively, and reflexively. This is not meant to put another layer of emotional labor on the speaker but, rather, to make ensure the implicit and explicit messages of the speaker are heard with the intention, attention, and reception (Gershon, 2013) which are intended. When students think critically about the forms of curriculum and the polyvocal ways that curricula have worked in concert to maintain the status quo, they often return to this question—“How am I to listen to you?”—and reflect on how they, as a cohort of mostly white cishetero women, might use this inquiry to resist and refuse normalized silencing in educational contexts.

Although there are many ways to approach curriculum studies, I have chosen to use sound as one instrument to help students listen differently and deeply to normalized structures

across systems of schooling and less local educational contexts. Teacher education programs across the United States continue to truncate curricular dialogues, leaving behind a sole focus on the formal curriculum and how it will be delivered. My hope is that students will use this activity as a touchstone, asking themselves what learning will sound like in their professions and, perhaps more significantly, how they will listen to their students as curricular reverberation move from their classrooms to the corridors, to community spaces.

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