

# The Unscripted

Series

Topic:  
Code-switching

## About

here are scripts running all the time in the classroom that tell us how to act, what to say, what's right and what isn't. In education these scripts are often referred to as the curriculum. The curriculum represents the formal resources that have been explicitly chosen to help students learn (E.g. Official textbooks or lesson plans). But a lesser known curriculum is also simultaneously operating in the background. This quiet script has been dubbed the "hidden curriculum" by several educators to describe the unintentional side effects of what we've chosen to teach. In the sections below, we hope to help you consider what has been excluded from the scripts that teach students how to live. We know that you can only cover so much material in the limited amount of time you have with your students. You don't need to try to tackle everything in order to become a little more conscious of how the educational system operates. You can just start by reflecting on your own teaching practices and if we can help you do that - we will have achieved a major goal toward unpacking the power of scripts not only for your students but for you too!

## What?

Individuals and cultural communities have a deep need to express their individuality and uniqueness's. However, shared understanding of our expressions can quickly break down in the classroom when students must move beyond the safety and understanding of trusted family, friends and tribe members. In many ways that's because our forms of communication are encoded and decoded by our culture and those within it. When students are asked to communicate with others outside of a shared familiar cultural context they can easily be misunderstood because their language of expression now operates in another cultural system that uses different codes they may not understand. If you have ever tried to communicate with a student or family member that doesn't speak the English you know that things don't always easily "transfer" from one cultural context to another. Code-switching is a savvy communication tactic frequently employed by members of minority groups to navigate encounters with those in power. It is an attempt to use familiar and mutually shared reference points often to "fit in" and make others feel more comfortable.

## So What?

Code-switching can help students bridge the gaps between the cultural expressions at homes and how they communicate at school. Students seeking to "fit in" with dominate culture may employ many code-switching strategies. Unfortunately for those in under-represented groups, this frequently involves "hiding" one's culture (in some cases children may literally try to hide) so as not to draw attention to themselves and/or to make those in the majority feel more comfortable. Because dominate cultural groups have the privilege of framing what is and is not considered an acceptable form of communication they don't usually need to code-switch. That is why educators must become conscious of their power to frame the rules of communication in the classroom. Depending on prior experiences and operating cultural assumptions - educators' must be self-aware of how they react when students don't conform to the norm. Children are only learning how to effectively code-switch so the burden is on educators to help model these experiences. That being said, educators are only human after all so it is important to acknowledge when these cross cultural experiences illicit internal feelings of being disrespecting, anger or even fear. In extreme trauma situations, vulnerable students may perceived those in power to be a threat so code-switching becomes a crucial teaching technique and essential to model. For example, if a child, youth or young adult encounters an armed police officer, their ability to code-switch may be the difference between life and death. If a suspect doesn't understand commands given by a police officer in English to "put your hands up" it can be mistaken as being uncooperative, antagonistic and even threatening. This is amplified by scripts that get played out in communities of practice that reinforce that people of color are deviant, violent and a threat. But even if the suspect understood the English language commands of the officer, they may not understand police culture. Countless Black children will recall their parents sitting them down to make sure they know what to do and say when they are confronted by the police. The ability to code switch can avoid a fatal ending to a "routine" traffic stop. One need only consider Sandra Bland who in 2015 was pulled over in Texas for failing to signal a lane change, arrested after an altercation with Officer Brian Encinia and found dead three days later in her jail cell.

## Now What?

Here are some additional resources to help you take action:

- Read this NPR article entitled "Five Reasons Why People Code-Switch" <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/04/13/177126294/five-reasons-why-people-code-switch>
- [What is Code-Switching: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNbdn0yuUw8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNbdn0yuUw8)
- [Wall Street Journal video of Sandra Bland arrest: https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=sandra+bland+video](https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=sandra+bland+video)
- Read this online Guardian article: "Sorry to Bother You, black Americans and the power and peril of code-switching": <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/25/sorry-to-bother-you-white-voice-code-switching>
- The National Council of Teachers of English has several resources on this topic available here: <https://store.ncte.org/#> =
- [Here are some activities for exploring code switching in the classroom: https://study.com/academy/lesson/code-switching-in-the-classroom.html](https://study.com/academy/lesson/code-switching-in-the-classroom.html)
- [An Interview With Lisa Delpit on Educating 'Other People's Children': https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/interview-lisa-delpit-educating-other-peoples-children/](https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/interview-lisa-delpit-educating-other-peoples-children/)
- [For a history of code switching check out: "The Neglected Early History of Codeswitching Research in the United States": https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234640326\\_The\\_Neglected\\_Early\\_History\\_of\\_Codeswitching\\_Research\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234640326_The_Neglected_Early_History_of_Codeswitching_Research_in_the_United_States)