EXPLORING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study analyzes to what extent the formal and hidden curriculum in responsible management education (RME) are aligned. Based on case study evidence of a "PRME Champion" school, we find that there was poor alignment between the school's explicit RME claims and students' lived experiences and interpretations.

INTRODUCTION

There is a considerable body of literature discussing the implementation of PRME in different business school contexts. Overall, this literature paints a mixed picture. While some studies find evidence that commitment to PRME can change RME practices even though implementation barriers need to be overcome (see e.g., Maloni et al., 2012; Solitander et al., 2011), other studies caution that commitment to these Principles may undercut critical reflexibility by faculty (Millar & Price, 2018) or may even end up as reputation management (Louw, 2015). Although these studies have added critical insights, they mostly focus on either explicit information about a school's commitment to PRME (e.g., by analyzing progress reports; Alcaraz et al.'s, 2011) or information gathered through faculty members' experiences (e.g., Burchell et al., 2015). Surprisingly little scholarly work has looked into how PRME has affected students' experience of RME. Even though a small number of PRME-related studies have focused on student experiences (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2017; Kirby, 2012), these works rarely consider the *tacit* messages that students receive in the context of RME.

Our study focuses on this tacit dimension of PRME implementation by empirically highlighting the role of the hidden curriculum (HC). The HC encompasses the socialization processes and informal learnings about norms and values that schools pass on to their students. Although the HC has been found to significantly influence students' moral learning (Hafferty &

Franks, 1994); it is rarely explicitly acknowledged in the RME context (for exceptions, see Blasco, 2012 and Borges et al., 2017). Getting the right RME message across to students is not only a matter of delivering formal curricular content, but also a matter of managing and aligning the HC's tacit messages with schools' more formal claims.

While Blasco's (2012) work has highlighted the need to align schools' formal and hidden RME curriculum, we still lack empirical insights into the degree to which such alignment actually exists. Our exploratory study aims to contribute to this debate and therefore asks the following research question: *Within business schools participating in the PRME, to what extent are the formal and the hidden RME curriculum aligned?* We explore this question through a case study of a "PRME Champion" school (i.e. a school which is recognized for its strong RME track-record; hereafter referred to as "The School"). Overall, our data indicates that The School's formal and hidden RME curriculum are not very well aligned. We found that misalignment was driven by the occurrence of tacit messages along three HC messages sites: the delivery of the formal curriculum, interpersonal interactions, and school governance. For instance, the formal curriculum was delivered in a way that students developed the impression that CSR (and similar concepts) were mere buzzwords, and that relevant discussions are soft, non-theoretical, and primarily grounded in common sense.

It is important to highlight the exploratory nature of our study. So far, the alignment between the formal and hidden RME curriculum has not been studied extensively, especially from students' point of view. While our study does not offer final or conclusive insights, we deliver indicative evidence of a previously neglected, but important, dimension of PRME implementation: the tacit RME messages as interpreted by students.

UNDERLYING DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Our case study focuses on a European public university with a strong focus on business studies which was chosen due to its position as one of the acknowledged PRME frontrunners. The School was among the first organizations which signed up to PRME, which means that RME has been on its agenda for almost a decade. This is important, because alignment between the formal and hidden curriculum can best be studied in a school where RME is not a new topic, but where relevant actors had sufficient time to implement it. The School established the Office of Responsible Management Education (also known as the "PRME Office"). In 2013, the UN appointed The School as one of 29 "PRME Champions." PRME Champions occupy a leadership position in terms of implementing PRME, and they are recognized as best practice examples.

As The School is a large organization with more than 20 Bachelor and 20 Master programs, we had to limit data collection to selected programs via "purposeful sampling" (Charmaz, 2006). We gathered data in seven study programs: five Bachelor programs and two Master programs. These programs were chosen for two reasons. First, they balance programs with a stronger focus on quantitative analyses with programs that put less emphasis on quantitative techniques. Second, the programs also refer to different academic departments at The School, which are mostly responsible for running the programs. The mix of Bachelor and Master programs ensured that we cover the variety of programs at different levels.

Our findings were generated from a triangulation of three data sources: (1) focus group interviews (including free writing sessions), (2) participant observations, and (3) an analysis of documents on RME at The School. Overall, we held 14 small focus groups with two to four students each – this resulted in a total number of 32 participants (12 male and 20 female). We

used random sampling to identify students from the different study programs for the focus groups. The small focus group format was adopted, as we needed detailed reflections on students' experiences vis-à-vis the HC. The small group size enabled such detailed reflections (see also Toner, 2009), while it, at the same time, also allowed for discussions among students. Each focus group lasted 40-60 minutes. One of the authors followed classroom practices as a participant observer. As most students are not aware of the HC, because they are "insiders" (Tonso, 2001), we believed that participant observation could help to reveal blind spots. During these observations, the participating author gathered insights by informal ad-hoc conversations with additional 15 students (8 male and 7 female). Finally, we also included several secondary data sources into the analysis, mostly in the form of documents that relate to The School's engagement in RME (e.g. its "Sharing Information on Progress" reports and the results originating from its own Curriculum Development Project).

Our data analysis does not represent a pure-play inductive approach, as grounded theory would traditionally suggest (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Instead, our coding procedure was also informed by our theoretical pre-understanding of key concepts such as the message sites attached to the HC. It is thus more appropriate to classify our research strategy as being abductive in character, since it involved back-and-forth movements between theoretical concepts and our empirical material (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010). More specifically, this involved a three-step procedure: First, when going through the data we assigned *first-level codes* to themes that were addressed by the interviewees. In frequent cases, this initial coding relied on "in-vivo codes" (see Charmaz, 2006: 55), that is, codes that stayed close to the terminology used by the interviewees. In a second step, we reached a higher level of abstraction by adding second-level codes that allowed us to subsume various first-level codes under one *dominant theme*. For instance, themes like "CSR as a buzzword" or "CSR as non-integrated topic" emerged from our data in this way. This second step involved various rounds of regrouping and analytical sharpening of the codes in relation to one another. The third step added the abductive element by cross-checking in how far the identified dominant themes were related to the HC message sites discussed by Blasco (2012) – i.e. formal curriculum, interpersonal interactions, and school governance. These three message sites reflect the *key categories* to which our data relates.

FINDINGS

The School's formal RME curriculum

Overall, The School communicates that RME is taken seriously across *all* study programs and that related content is integrated into the formal curriculum (e.g., by embedding it into courses and also by having devoted standalone courses). The School's President emphasized on several occasions that RME content is implicit in call degree programs that are offered. Although the availability and depth of RME content differs across study programs, students in all programs are exposed to relevant debates at some point. Further, all study programs, for which relevant data was available, aim at integrating RME debates into the competency profile that underlies the course portfolio. It is therefore fair to conclude that the selected programs attempt to anchor RME content throughout the formal curriculum, even though there are differences in terms of the level of integration. While the formal curriculum can tell us whether RME content is present, the HC can reveal how students experience such content and what kind of signals they believe to receive.

The School's Hidden RME Curriculum

Our findings in this part are structured along the three HC message sites identified by Blasco (2012): i.e. formal curriculum, interpersonal interactions, and school governance.

The formal curriculum. It is the tacit messages related to the *delivery* of the formal curriculum that matter (e.g., classroom and assessment practices). These practices can send subtle messages to the students about which learnings are important. For instance, students often have an instructor-oriented attitude – i.e. their study behavior is influenced by what the instructor finds relevant (Bergenhenegouwen, 1987). Within our study context, students pointed out that discussions around concepts like CSR, sustainability, and ethics remained superficial in their perception. The term "buzzword" stood out as an emic category across all focus groups. Students, who did not use the term "buzzword" explicitly, used similar descriptions (e.g., "posh word", focus group 7) that indicated that they found CSR to be a rather superficial concept without much meaning and usefulness. A number of students also perceived RME as being primarily about common sense – something that everybody knows about anyway without having to study it. Students thought that they do not have to learn about it in university, because they could always just talk their way around it. Many students also highlighted that RME-related debates had never been a prevalent theme in their assigned readings. As one student explained: "I remember at the Bachelor, CSR was always a chapter in the back of our books. But it never really felt like it was part of the courses" (focus group 2).

Several students highlighted that RME did not influence some of the "harder" subjects like finance or accounting. While all programs have some sort of RME-related content, the integration of relevant debates throughout the curriculum was lacking. One student highlighted: "I do not feel that it is something we really learn in the study. I mean we learn about CSR, this is more common, but it is not so much in relation to the individual subject or study program." (focus group 11) This general lack of integration led students believe that RME content was more of an "add-on" to their studies. One student emphasized: "It's like when you know the basic things about the other topics, you can add CSR as something extra. We have to know how to make a good marketing report, and then we can add some CSR if necessary, but it's not like a very important topic." (focus group 12)

Interpersonal interactions. Through social interactions, both within and beyond the classroom, students are socialized into one or more groups where the degree of belonging depends on the students' alignment with the group's dominant norms. Lecturers can influence learnings not only through the design and delivery of the formal curriculum, but also through their language of socialization (e.g., related to examples, metaphors, success stories, cautionary tales; see Blasco, 2012). Our data shows that at least some lecturers practiced differentiated treatment based on study programs. While lecturers socialized finance students into competition and ambition for grades and prestige, at least some instructors for the other programs did the opposite. One non-finance student observed that the lecturers are not very ambitious (focus group 3). During the focus group, the same student told about an incident in an economics class where the lecturer had introduced the class with the statement: "We're doing the easy version, so it's not too difficult for you" (focus group 3).

Our data shows that it is important to have an eye both for socialization processes (a) between students from different study programs and (b) among students from the same program (e.g., Elkin, 1995; Sambell & McDowell, 1998). Again, we observed differences between

finance/accounting students and students from "softer" study programs. CSR and related topics are not a concern for finance-focused students, because they do not see this particular topic helping them achieve the success they strive for. As one student put it: "I think that most of my friends at [this study program] are pretty indifferent to CSR. They want to be investment bankers, so to them it's numbers and profit optimization that count and not child labor in Africa" (focus group 6). CSR is not perceived as core to students' socialization processes or their ambitions and aspirations, and hence there is no motivation to pursue relevant practices. One student summed it up: "Society doesn't see CSR as prestigious or as a high-achieving thing. And these guys [his fellow classmates] claim to be high-achievers. A CSR manager is just not as prestigious as an investment banker. Are you in the top 2 % or not? And CSR managers, at the moment, are not" (focus group 3).

School governance. The term "governance" is used in a rather broad understanding here and refers to whether schools really practice what they preach (Blasco, 2012). For instance, a school that emphasizes RME should reflect on its own social and environmental practices. School governance also encompasses the physical structure of the school such as the lecture halls, buildings, and the larger campus area. Some students thought it is unethical of The School to let corporations with questionable pasts/reputations sponsor lecture halls and have their logos on display. One student expressed it like this: "It feels like [The School] values big corporations with power and money more than anything, and that it is their interests we should serve. It seems a little bit contradictory that they sponsor the halls where we have ethics classes" (focus group 1). For instance, students emphasized the role of a tobacco firm, which was until recently one of The School's corporate sponsors. One student discussed The School's reactive way of handling the case: "I think it has been quite reactive so far. Because they had all these collaborations, let's say with the [tobacco firm], where they only reacted when people started to ask 'hey why are you collaborating with them' and then ended the partnership" (focus group 7).

IMPLICATIONS

Connotative Decoupling in Responsible Management Education

Our findings are relevant for the literature that discusses the possibility of policy-practice decoupling in RME (e.g., Rasche & Gilbert, 2015). Currently, research in this area is primarily concerned with the extent to which the formal RME curriculum is integrated into classroom practices. Our study complements this literature by offering exploratory insights into a new mechanism: even if the formal RME curriculum *has* found its way into classroom education (and thus would not constitute policy-practice decoupling as such), we reveal that misalignments can still occur on a different level. Misalignments may also be based on the *connotative* use of language (i.e. the hidden messages and wider meaning associations that audiences interpret "between the lines"; cf. Li, 2017). In our study, the uncovered tacit messages signaled a depreciation of topics like CSR which, in turn, undermined the value of RME in the eyes of students. Although our data should *not* be interpreted as showing comprehensive evidence for such connotative decoupling, our study yields at least indicative evidence for the existence of such decoupling in the RME context.

Emphasizing the possibility of connotative decoupling implies that misalignments not only happen between what actors say they will do (e.g., in a syllabus) and what they actually do (e.g., in a classroom), which has been emphasized by existing policy-practice decoupling discussion

within the RME literature, but also between what actors say (e.g., in a syllabus) and what others interpret they mean with it (e.g., the tacit messages as interpreted by students). For instance, a lecturer may emphasize topics like sustainability and CSR throughout the syllabus but then overlook them when it comes to the exam. Students, in turn, may perceive this as a signal of irrelevance. The notion of connotative RME decoupling sensitizes us for the importance of the meaning dimension in decoupling; in this regard, our study can be seen as part of a larger theoretical stream that has been termed "communicative institutionalism" (Cornelissen et al., 2015).

Overcoming PRME Implementation Barriers

What can be done to align more closely the formal and hidden RME curriculum to support PRME implementation? Asking this question requires us to reflect on how business schools can alter the tacit messages that students receive. We believe there are two approaches to tackle this challenge. First, schools can look into different activities that address the identified problems along the three message sites. We share Blasco's (2012) belief that it is possible to launch activities which instill "PRME friendly attitudes and behaviors" (p. 380) into the different message sites. However, while some activities can help to at least challenge the messages that students receive, it is also clear that not all tacit messages can be addressed in this way. For instance, the fact that CSR is mostly seen as a buzzword and common-sense topic shows that some of the problems relate to more fundamental discussions about what exactly business school education stands for. This brings us to the second, more far-reaching, approach to change. This approach would start by asking a more basic question: *What and who are business schools for?* Recently, Parker (2018) argued that the problem of business school education is that the formal and hidden curriculum assume "capitalism, corporations and managers as the default form of organization, and everything else as history, anomaly, exception, alternative" (p. 102).

A number of the tacit messages, which we identified, can be attributed to business education being too narrowly focused on one way of organizing only: the profit-oriented corporation. Such "intellectual closure" (Parker, 2018: 93) impedes change, because it affects thinking, teaching, socializing, and learning in business schools. Students, who view CSR managers as being less prestigious as bankers or who believe they are in a "better" program because of its focus on quantitative methods, have a too narrow view of business school education.

Many business schools focus on a fraction of the possible forms of organizing human activities (Parker, 2018). Although courses on CSR (and related topics) are exceptional in that they consider other forms of organizing business activities (e.g., social enterprises), the majority of courses still uses profit-oriented corporations as the only relevant unit of analysis. It is thus not surprising that students view "corporate sustainability" as being about securing the long-term *financial* profitability of a firm (Kirby, 2012). We thus have to promote teaching that views profit-oriented corporations as only one of many possible forms to organize human activity (e.g., such as collectives and clubs). Opening business schools to the whole spectrum of different types of organizing is ambitious, but it opens an opportunity to challenge those ideologies that reinforce the tacit messages surrounding the hidden curriculum in the RME context.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS