

## The Hidden Curriculum

### Why read this text...

The concept of the hidden curriculum is useful for 1) exploring implicit knowledge, moral assumptions and hierarchical designs embedded in and conveyed through school organization and classroom routine – and 2) assessing their impact on children's learning, sense of belonging and identity formation. The concept helps us reflect on the contradictions of schooling by calling attention to how efforts to inculcate values of democratic equality may lead to the perpetuation of class-based hierarchy, or how expanding universal literacy tends to ride roughshod over local literacies.

The hidden curriculum is a muddy concept. It raises questions of how a 'curriculum' gets hidden, who hid it from whom, and why. It also raises questions of how children discern 'hidden messages'. Because it denotes collusion, the concept is more often used to expose negative rather than positive consequences of schooling. Because it offers no theory of learning, most analyses of the consequences of 'hidden curricula' remain speculative.

Despite these drawbacks, we include the concept here to encourage reflection on the interplay of pedagogical, institutional and social learning environments and the important question of how humans learn what is not explicitly taught.

### Historical context

To account for the persistence of contradictory and undesirable features of society, Robert Merton (1956) drew a distinction between manifest (intended) and latent (unintended) functions to call attention to the many *indirect or implicit consequences* of people's actions (Helm 1971). Drawing on Dewey's notion of 'collateral learning' and Dreeben's 'unwritten curriculum,' P. W. Jackson (1968) coined the term 'hidden curriculum' to explore the tacit or implicit messages conveyed through everyday classroom routines (Cornbleth 1984, 35). His goal was to examine how children experience morally imbued routines of taking turns, sitting still, listening, lining up, and how teachers wielded their evaluative and disciplinary authority.

Jackson argued that, to succeed in school, students must master both 'official' and 'hidden' curricula (1968: 33-34). They must fulfil academic requirements, while navigating social intimacies in crowded classrooms, ongoing evaluation by teachers and peers, and teachers' pedagogical authority to define and decide (1968: 35-36).

The concept of the hidden curriculum was popular in the 1970-1980s in critical studies of the school's role as an economic and political institution. In *Social Education in the Classroom: The Dynamics of the Hidden Curriculum*, Giroux and Penna (1979) challenge the 'naïve' idea that curriculum reform alone can solve ongoing problems of instruction and learning. They define the hidden curriculum as unstated norms, values and beliefs transmitted to students through underlying structures of meaning in both formal curriculum content and everyday classroom life (1979: 22). When tacitly conveyed as objective, factional knowledge and

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unquestioned truths, unexamined cultural biases and ideological positions, and the social control inherent in these, potentially undermine democratic educational goals (1979: 21-22).

Vallance argues that social control has always been a feature of public schooling, often deemed beneficial for its contribution to societal cohesion (cf. Durkheim). Given that mundane school routines are not hidden, but openly performed, Vallance suggests that the 'discovery' of the hidden curriculum in the 1960s had more to do with the fact that the school's 'control function' had been deleted from then current rationales for public education (1973-4:5-6).

Using the notion of the hidden curriculum in the sense of a 'hidden agenda', studies have addressed educational paradoxes, such as how public schools speak to ideologies of social equality while reproducing hierarchies based in social class, race and gender. More recently the concept of hidden curriculum has been deployed in critical studies of medical, science, music, and physical education to explore implicit gender biases and modes of professionalism.

## **a) Discussion**

Similar to concepts such as 'culture' and 'discourse', a 'hidden curriculum' does not exist 'out there' to be discovered. It is an analytical synthesis, constructed from observable social organization and patterns of behaviour particular to a specific setting. As a domain of inquiry, it is useful for reflecting on 1) the relationship between school and society and 2) the metacommunication (Bateson 1972) inherent in all institutional practices. Attempts to delineate clear boundaries between official and hidden curricula is not fruitful, as the social, didactic, moral, emotional and cognitive aspects of, say, learning fractions or Viking history in classrooms of 20-30 students, are inevitably entangled, simultaneous and inseparable.

The hidden curriculum has been glossed as the 'unwritten, 'unstudied', 'latent,' 'implicit' and 'covert' 'non-academic outcome,' 'by-products,' 'residues' or 'secondary consequences' of schooling (Valance 1973-4: 6-7). This conceptual muddle makes it difficult to ascertain what makes up an unwritten curriculum', the strength of its impact and the mechanisms by which it works. As Dreeben asks: 'If the unwritten curriculum is really unwritten,' hidden, tacit and latent, how do we know it is there and has an impact that we should pay attention to?' (1976: 114). For him, the 'unwritten curriculum' was convenient shorthand for cultural and structural aspects of school organization and instruction, and the implication that children infer modes of thinking, social norms, and principles of conduct from their prolonged involvement in these arrangements (1976:112). For example, in monitoring their school environs to assess modes and limits of suitable behaviour, schoolchildren are likely to figure out that substitutes are not 'real' teachers and thus need not be treated with comparable respect.

The 'discovery' of the hidden curriculum was couched in allegations that schools systematically teach more than the claim to teach (Valence 1973-4: 5). Yet this is true of the human condition in general. Because words reduce the complexity of action, people always do more than they claim to do. If you try to describe 'everything going on' in a classroom at



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any given moment, you soon discover that you cannot possibly grasp in words all the action and implications of action that your senses pick up on. However, by paying attention to some of the discontinuities between acting and speaking (and the patterned relations between them) we are provided with clues for making sense of a given situation. For example, if lessons officially scheduled to start at 8 am frequently start at 8:15 am, we may infer that lessons 'really' start 15 minutes later than scheduled.

A hidden curriculum allegedly functions to inculcate moral values, train obedience and docility, and socialize children in ways that perpetuate established structures of class, gender and race. The idea is that forms of social control embedded in a school's organization and daily routines 'instruct' children about normative and moral ways of being in the world. By impinging on their patterns of behaviour and thought, these arrangements offer particular versions of the world and pose 'practical problems' for children to consider. Such 'problems' may include whether or not to cut ahead in line to be with a good friend or whether to share ones grapes with everyone at the table or just Louise. They may also include figuring out how to think and feel about to being told to 'act ones age' or that one is 'falling behind.' And they always include figuring out whether to 'speak up' or 'lay low' in classroom discussions that threaten to display differences of family background that make a difference.

## **b) Ethnographic example**

One conundrum of schooling is that reforms often do not bring about desired changes; rather they amount to little more than tinkering with the status quo. To explain this state of affairs, some scholars turn to the hidden curriculum. Although such studies are often theoretically thick and ethnographically thin, they pose a problem worthy of attention.

In the article, *Critical Race Theory, Multicultural Education and the Hidden Curriculum of Hegemony*, Michelle Jay revisits the role of the hidden curriculum in education to argue that it "enables educational institutions to argue in support of multicultural initiatives while simultaneously suppressing multicultural education's transformative possibilities" (2003:3). Jay addresses pluralist efforts in the USA to revise social studies curricula to make them more representative of the changing population. Their goals are to challenge racism, reduce prejudice and discrimination, provide equal opportunity and social justice for all, and equip children with the knowledge, attitude and skills to live in a diverse nation and world. Yet as Jay notes, despite its thirty-year history, and some significant advances, multicultural education is still struggling to make an impact on American education (2003: 4).

Drawing on Gramsci's notion of hegemony and critical race theory, Jay theorizes the hidden curriculum as a 'hegemonic device,' which despite the good intentions of reformers, 'sucks multicultural initiatives back in to the system,' forestalling any substantial changes to the current order (2003:4). Interrogating the role of the hidden curriculum in the failure of US schools to properly educate minority students, Jay notes that transformations posed by multicultural initiatives threaten power arrangements that privilege Whites. Rather than seeing measures to maintain this power position as simple domination from above, Jay



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focuses on 'hegemonic strategies' (negotiation, incorporation and concession) aimed at securing compliance. Given the diversity of the American population, multicultural education cannot be dismissed. It can however be 'incorporated' through curriculum add-ons, annual celebrations and ideological assimilation in ways that keep it ideologically safe, and keep at bay any real questioning of a system that allows racist, sexist and classist oppression to persist (Jay 2003: 6).

Jay puts a 'hidden curriculum' that inculcates the 'values, attitudes, ideas, objectives and the cultural and political meanings of the dominant class' at the heart of the school's cultural and social reproduction. Claiming that the reproductive forces of schooling thwart transformations sought by pluralist initiatives, and thus sustain White privilege, Jay produces a plausible theoretical argument, yet unfortunately, like many scholars before her, very little ethnographic evidence of how this actually works in practice.

## Thinking further:

1. Identify a practice or routine at your school that exemplifies a 'hidden curriculum.' Describe this routine or practice in detail and discuss which 'tacit message' it offers children and how they tend to respond.
2. Identify a policy or curriculum reform, the changes it intended to bring about, what did or did not actually change. Discuss what allows some actions and routines to persist despite intentions to change them.

## KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Tacit knowledge, doxa, cultural models, hegemony, world-making, enculturation

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