Introduction

Philip Jackson (1968) highlights the term ‘hidden curriculum’ in his book *Life in Classrooms*, and he is generally cited as the originator of the term. Yet it appears to have been used by William Waller in the early 1930s (Eisner, 1985).

Hidden Curriculum and Related Terms

There are many other terms and expressions which relate closely to the term ‘hidden curriculum’ including:

- unwritten curriculum;
- null curriculum.

Exponents of ‘unwritten curriculum’, such as Blumberg and Blumberg (1994), contend that the unwritten curriculum simply exists as a byproduct of educational system and not because anyone has deliberately hidden certain learning experiences. These authors conclude that schools focus on the work of learning and as a consequence can’t be involved in nurturing/caring roles.

Eisner (1985) refers to ‘null curriculum’ as those aspects of curriculum which schools do not teach. He contends that ‘subjects that are now taught are part of a tradition, and traditions create expectations, they create predictability, and they sustain stability’ (p.90). Eisner considers that schools ignore or minimize visual, auditory and metaphoric ways of knowing.

Jackson (1968) focuses upon psychological aspects of schooling which socialize students in very powerful ways. He emphasizes three elements of the ‘hidden curriculum’ as being:

- the crowded nature of the classroom – pupils have to cope with delays, denial of their desires and social distractions;
- contradictory allegiances required to both teachers and peers;
- unequal power relations given to teachers over pupils.

These three elements of ‘crowds’, ‘praise’ and ‘power’ give rise to norms of behaviour in classrooms – ‘the sum total of unofficial institutional expectations, values and norms aimed at by educational administrators, and perhaps teachers and to a lesser extent parents, and which are initially completely unknown to the students’ (Portelli, 1993, p. 345). Jackson’s analysis of hidden curriculum is labelled as a ‘functionalist’ perspective because it is assumed that schools promote the goals and functions of the wider society. That is,
Jackson was intent on explaining how structures within schools operate or function. There have been many neo-Marxist perspectives about ‘hidden curriculum’. For example, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that schools function to maintain the capitalist system because of particular social relations which occur in schools, namely:

- the hierarchical division of labour between teachers and pupils;
- the alienated character of pupils’ school work;
- the fragmentation in work (and the destructive competition among students).

They argue that a student’s social class/race/gender all have significance in determining the social experiences they have at school – that is, there is not a unitary hidden curriculum but ‘many’.

Michael Apple (in several major books (1979, 1982, 1986)), argues from a slightly different neo-Marxist stance. Apple (1979) argues in ‘Ideology and Curriculum’ that there is high-status and low-status curriculum knowledge. The poor and minorities are excluded from the high-status (technical) knowledge and this is used as a device to filter for economic stratification and future career prospects. In ‘Education and Power’, Apple (1982) argues that schools are producers of culture and its reproduction in schools is presented in forms which is either accepted (by career-oriented bourgeoisie) or contested and resisted (by lower classes). In ‘Teachers and Texts’, Apple (1986) describes how reproduction occurs through the control of teachers and textbooks in schools. He argues that the variety of textbooks and curriculum packages on the market causes teachers (and especially females as they are in the majority in the teaching profession) to be deskilled.

**The Logic of Hidden Curriculum**

Portelli (1993) emphasizes that the term is ‘hidden’ and not ‘hiding’. He suggests that there are three possible options in terms of logic:

- X actually hid himself/herself, that is X is responsible for the hiding, X is an agent;
- X was intentionally concealed by someone else (Y);
- X is concealed, X is hidden unintentionally.

Portelli (1993) proceeds to argue that the hidden curriculum is not an agent and so the first option is incorrect. The other two options are possible, especially when it is remembered that a curriculum could be hidden from one person but not another.

Seddon (1983) asserts that there can be degrees of hiddenness. Can the effects of the hidden curriculum be beneficial as well as detrimental? According to Seddon (1983), the hidden curriculum involves the learning of attitudes, norms, beliefs, values and assumptions often expressed as rules, rituals and regulations. They are rarely questioned and are just taken for granted. The judgment about whether a hidden curriculum is positive or negative depends upon the value stance of the person concerned.
Examples of Hidden Curriculum

A very powerful impression of the hidden curriculum at work is contained in Paul Willis (1977) ‘Learning to Labour’. He portrays how twelve ‘lads’, observed at a northern county secondary school, resisted the authority of the school system and developed their own counter culture. The boys were able to penetrate the arbitrariness of the power relationship between teachers and students and in fact developed their own powers within the school environment (Lynch, 1989, p. 17). But in practising their resistance at school they reproduced their male working-class position, which is likely to lead to a subordinate social position in adult life. Willis argues that it is not school structures which are important in understanding the hidden curriculum but pupil resistances.

Connell et al. (1982) also provide compelling images in their analysis of working class comprehensive schools and independent schools:

There is a lot more noise, movement and mess in the working-class comprehensives. The kids rush, slouch, stroll and huddle around, in a mixture of uniform, part-uniform and anti-uniform clothes. At breaks, the grounds give off a tremendous babble punctuated by yells (some from the teachers), with a general air of undisciplined energy. After breaks, there is likely to be a layer of wrappers, paper bags, leaves and other junk left stirring in the breeze.

By contrast, the impression created by the Independent schools is one of effortless good order. The contrast forces itself on anyone coming from the state school system. The buildings may not be palatial but the grounds are carefully planted and cultivated and punctiliously clean. All the kids wear uniforms and all the uniforms are neat. There are rarely raised voices to be heard and (apart from the junior boys) not much running in the playground at breaks. (Connell et al., p. 79)

The authors argue that a student typically uses three strategies, in different degrees, to cope with the hidden curriculum namely:

- resistance: the school is a focus of struggles with authority;
- compliance: enthusiastic engagement with the school on certain matters;
- pramatism: a ‘fitting in’ where there are benefits to be gained.

Lynch (1989) argues that inequality is perpetuated via the hidden curriculum because of ‘universalistic’ and ‘particularistic’ aspects of schools. Many of the universalistic
qualities of schools are highly visible and include such elements of provision as syllabuses, prescribed content, length of school periods and examination procedures. They apply to all students regardless of social class and background. Particularistic aspects of schools apply more to consumption elements such as streaming and grading, timetabling practices and reward systems. These elements are more familiar to some social groups and are used by them to further their own ends. It is the particularistic elements that increase inequalities but they are not widely known or understood and are ‘hidden’ from many groups.

In her study of 1990 schools in Ireland she discovered that schools which were predominantly middle and upper class maximized the consumption of educational resources among all students (frequent assessments, strong academic climate) whereas in schools with large numbers of working class students, consumption was maximized only for a minority of the higher achieving students. Whitty (1995) suggests that policies included in the Education Reform Act for England and Wales (1988) have produced this differentiation, with LEA schools becoming yet again the paupers compared with the public schools.

‘Examinations’ seem to carry a hidden curriculum of their own (see also Chapter 7). Although the major purpose of examinations is to assess students’ performance they can also have a considerable effect upon:

- methods of teaching;
- students’ levels of motivation;
- assignment of senior teachers to particular classes;
- interactions between a teacher and students.

Turner (1983) suggests that for some students the hidden curriculum effects of examinations are to stimulate conformity to teachers’ demands. However some students may seek deviant behaviour because it is more attractive to them than passing examinations. Some of the very able students may be very selective and only conform in activities that they perceive are directly related to the passing of examinations.

**Reflections and Issues**

1. Is the hidden curriculum a process or an outcome of learning or both? Use examples to illustrate your answer.

2. ‘To make sense of the hidden curriculum means that schools have to be analysed as agents of legitimation, organized to produce and reproduce the dominant categories, values, and social relationships necessary for the maintenance of the larger society.’ (Giroux, 1981, p.72)

   Provide arguments to support or refute this stance.
3 ‘The reason why the term “hidden curriculum” has become so accepted is that by definition its mechanisms are so difficult to uncover; cause and effect remain largely at the speculative level and it is a convenient concept to explain the large part of school life rarely open to quantitative research, but full of conjecture.’ (Davies, 1990, p. 188)

Discuss.

4 Whose interests are served by hidden curriculum? Is it possible to reveal and incorporate a hidden curriculum into a ‘taught’ curriculum?

5 Consider the matter of school uniform: what rule violations are ignored by teachers? Are the rules more prescriptive for boys or girls? Does the school uniform try to play down sex differences? What are some symbolic meanings of school uniform (for example, hair length)? What aspects of ingenuity by students are tolerated so that students can compete with current fashions?

Reflect upon these matters and provide answers based upon your teaching experiences and point of view.

6 ‘Schools uphold certain limited kinds of academic skills – particularly logical mathematical and linguistic intelligences – and demean and marginalise the rest.’ (Lynch, 1989)

Discuss.

7 ‘The differences in social, racial, ethnic and class backgrounds that students bring to schools are “maintained” or “magnified” as a result of their interaction with its organizational structures.’ (Bullivant, 1987, p. 15)

Discuss.

8 ‘Individual competition is only fair if one competes in a world with equally privileged peers. In a materially and culturally hierarchical society, competition between equals is impossible without either handicapping the privileged or compensating the relatively disadvantaged.’ (Lynch, 1989, pp. 147-8)

Discuss.

9 Cornbleth (1991) describes the following as examples of hidden curriculum:
   • arrangement of time, facilities, materials and examinations;
   • compartmentalization of school programme into separate subjects;
- texts treated as the most authoritative sources of knowledge;
- grading systems;
- district policies, school rituals.

Comment upon the extent to which you consider these examples are significant in
the light of your teaching experiences.

10 Walker (1990) distinguishes between the teacher in the formal situation where he/she
is constantly the centre of attraction and the informal situation when the teacher can
be less conspicuous and more personal. Do hidden curriculum elements assume
greater importance in formal or informal learning situations? If so, what are the
implications for teachers?

11 ‘It is incumbent on teachers to unveil the hidden curriculum as much as possible
because of their moral obligations to students – treating them with respect, being
honest with them.’ (Portelli, 1993)

Critically analyse this statement. To what extent can a teacher minimize a hidden
curriculum? Is it possible for teaching to largely be an intentional and cooperative
activity?

12 Student alienation is a highly complex phenomenon (Cumming, 1996), endemic to
many schools, and in many ways, a cause and an effect of hidden curriculum.

Explain how student alienation can be both a cause and an effect. To what extent
can student alienation issues be addressed through the reform of middle schooling?

Reference
CA, Corwin.
Books.
Falmer Press.
Making the Difference, Sydney, George Allen and Unwin.
CUMMING, J. (1996) *From Alienation to Engagement: Opportunities for Reform in the Middle Years of Schooling*, Volume 3, Canberra, ACSA.


