SCHOOL CULTURE:
EXPLORING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

David J. Wren

ABSTRACT

Educators frequently overlook school culture. This article encourages teachers and administrators to gain a more complete picture of the school environment through an exploration of the symbolic nature of the hidden, or implicit, curriculum. A historical overview of the influence of the hidden curriculum on the educational process is presented. In addition, a checklist for examining symbolic aspects of the school environment is provided.

Since the mid-1970s (the era of human resources management), the study of behavior in organizations has strongly influenced the practice of school administration. Previously, administrative theory had stressed a “scientific” approach to educational goals, setting forth objectives in explicit, behavioral terms. However, planning systems, including management by objectives (MBOs) and planning, programming, and budgeting systems (PPBSs), offshoots of the scientific approach in the management of educational institutions and governmental agencies, often underestimated the importance of the dynamics of human interactions in organizational behavior.

In order to have a more complete picture of their schools, administrators need to become cognizant of the almost imperceptible yet powerful influence of institutional culture/climate. Culture refers to the values and symbols that affect organizational climate (in this case, students’ and educators’ perceptions of the school environment). According to Owens (1987), the symbolic aspects of school activities (e.g., traditions, rites, and rituals) must be considered, for these are “the values that are transmitted literally from one generation of the organization to another” (p. 168). The present article explores the hidden, or implicit, curriculum—school spirit, or ethos—as well as its beneficial and detrimental effects on the teaching/learning environment.

Reprint requests to David J. Wren, Ed.D., South Scranton Intermediate School, 355 Maple Street, Scranton, Pennsylvania 18505.

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THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM UNCOVERED

Usually, when educators refer to school curriculum, they have explicit, consciously planned course objectives in mind. In contrast to this didactic curriculum, students experience an “unwritten curriculum” characterized by informality and lack of conscious planning. In fact, “all students must internalize a specific program of social norms for training in order to function effectively as members of a smaller society, the school, and later on as productive citizens of the larger American society” (Wren, 1993, p. 3). Thus, teachers’ and administrators’ interactions with students help shape attitudes and ideals (Henry, 1955).

Historical Overview

The two curricula were united in American classrooms from colonial times until the late 19th century. The school environment was carefully supervised by teachers and administrators, who expected conformity both in behavior and academics. Hirsch (1987) found almost complete congruence of values within American schools during this era. Ryan (1987) has described how the McGuffey graded reader series was used to inculcate discipline, good conduct, punctuality, respect for authority, and other commonly held social values.

During the post–Civil War period, instruction consisted mostly of transmitting factual information to rows of quiet, submissive students, many of whom were recent immigrants. Thus, America’s public schools functioned much like a factory (Apple & King, 1983).

From the late-19th to mid-20th century, progressive educators, such as John Dewey, William Kilpatrick, and Harold Rugg, helped to bring about major changes. Religious teachings, so common in the previous century, were largely removed from the public schools (Ryan, 1987). Vallance (1973) concluded that, as a direct result of this progressivism, teachers became uncomfortable with their traditional role as inculcators of values. Instead, they relied on the school environment to be the socializing agent for overall student development.

The Hidden Curriculum’s Impact on Behavior

During the past three decades, researchers have investigated both the beneficial and detrimental effects of school climate on the socialization process. Regarding positive effects, Bloom (1981) and Baltzell (1979) have described how the two curricula have worked in a complementary fashion (e.g., in Quaker schools). Kraybill (1991) has described how a school for Mennonites (a religious sect that traditionally encouraged separation from worldly affairs) passed on the faith as well
as began a program of active involvement in community issues. Jack-
son (1968), a pioneer in the study of the hidden curriculum, reported
that valuing successful competition in the working world had an effect
on students’ skills, beliefs, and attitudes toward work.

In terms of negative effects, discipline problems may occur for stu-
dents who have difficulty following and internalizing classroom rules
and daily routines (Jackson, 1968). The hidden curriculum can also
promote student reluctance to challenge teachers on educational is-
ues. In addition, Sadker and Sadker (1985) found that boys received
more of their teachers’ time and attention, whereas girls often were
more docile and reticent to call attention to themselves.

Paradoxes
There are several paradoxes regarding the nature and utility of the
hidden curriculum in schools. First, since it is by nature more sponta-
aneous and less explicit than the regular curriculum, is there anything
educators can do to modify its influence on students? Second, if it is
possible for educators to achieve consistency in its application, will
shedding its hidden nature alter its influence? Finally, is it desirable
for educators to seek renewed uniformity in school culture in a pro-
nouncedly multicultural society?

HIDDEN CURRICULUM CHECKLIST

Attaining greater understanding of the hidden curriculum offers a
grassroots approach to complement top-down school improvement
methods (e.g., MBOs and PPBSs). The following checklist can help
educators examine the symbolic aspects of the school environment.

I. School Rules, Ceremonies, Rituals, and Routines
1. There are regular inter- and intrascholastic competitions, pep
rallies, and schoolwide assemblies (yes or no).
2. There are opening convocations and appropriate end-of-the-year
ceremonies and activities (yes or no).
3. The school has its own motto, colors, etc. (yes or no).
4. There are regularly scheduled field trips (yes or no).
5. Students regularly receive recognition for outstanding conduct,
grades, and other achievements (yes or no).
6. School policies regarding homework, discipline, and safety (e.g.,
fire drills) are well-known to both faculty and students, and are consis-
tently enforced by the principal (yes or no).
II. Document Analysis

1. Documents available for students' use (check each type): (a) yearbook, (b) school newspaper, (c) handbook, (d) school calendar.

2. Documents available for faculty and community members (check each type): (a) handbook, (b) announcements, (c) mission statement, (d) newsletters (e) reports on school/community service projects.

CONCLUSIONS

Educators need to be aware of the symbolic aspects of the school environment (i.e., its culture), as well as adolescents' and teachers' perceptions (i.e., school climate). Greater understanding of the hidden curriculum will help them to achieve the goal of providing effective schools in the 21st century.

REFERENCES