

Differentiate among  
the formal, informal  
and hidden  
curriculum



The world is ever changing, and what is taught in schools must also change. The concept of curriculum planning must be viewed critically at the purposes, content and processes in a holistic manner. “ How we perceive of curriculum making is important because our conceptions and ways of reasoning about curriculum reflect and shape how we see, think and talk about, study and act on the education made available to students. Our curriculum conceptions, ways of reasoning and practice cannot be value neutral. They necessarily reflect our assumption about the world, even if those assumptions remain implicit and unexamined. Furthermore, concern with conceptions is not “ merely theoretical”. Conceptions emerge from and enter into practice” (Cornbleth, 1990). In essence, one’s approach to curriculum is shaped by one’s views of the world and their values (philosophy), of how children develop and behave (psychology) and on social issues (sociology) (Harris, 2010). This paper will seek to define the concept of curriculum, the formal, informal and hidden curriculum and provide arguments explaining the extent to which the hidden curriculum has a greater impact than the formal curriculum on the development of learners.

Depending on one’s conception of curriculum, the definition may vary. But an important point to note is that the definition is not static, it is dynamic in that it changes over time. According to Todd writing in 1965, “ A curriculum is defined as the planned educational experiences offered by a school which can take place anywhere at any time in the multiple context of the school (pg 2). Another definition as posited by Wilson writing in 1990, defines the curriculum as “ Anything and everything that teaches a lesson, planned or otherwise. He argues that humans are born learning, and therefore the

curriculum must encompass a combination of the hidden, informal, formal, political and societal curricula as students learn continuously through experiences and modeled behaviours from their teachers and other members of staff whether administrative, ancillary or otherwise.

Dimensions of curriculum planning will encompass the elements or approaches, the types (formal, informal and hidden) and the conceptions or orientations. Whichever type of curriculum is adopted by a department, emphasis must be on the needs of the students, the school context and statutory and syllabus requirements. Wilson (2005) argues that the types of curriculum that exists are open to interpretation as the curriculum reflects the models of instructional delivery and the psychological classifications of learning theories. While he contends that many curricula exist, the formal/overt, informal and hidden curricula are widely used within educational institutions. The formal curriculum “ is simply that which is written as part of formal instruction of schooling experiences. It may refer to a curriculum document, texts, films, and supportive teaching materials that are overtly chosen to support the intentional instructional agenda of a school. Thus, the overt curriculum is usually confined to those written understandings and directions formally designated and reviewed by administrators, curriculum directors and teachers, often collectively” (Wilson, 2005). The formal curriculum therefore embodies the learning activities that are planned, organized and implemented within regular school hours. The informal curriculum on the other hand refers to the learning experiences adopted from other agencies outside the formal setting such as parents, peers, media and community. The informal curriculum is sometimes referred

to as co-curricular activities. Longstreet and Shane (1993) view the hidden curriculum as “ the kinds of learning children derive from the very nature and organizational design of the public school, as well as from the behaviors and attitudes of teachers and administrators” (pg 46). Whichever type of curriculum is chosen to meet the needs of the students within the defined school context and in lieu with the statutory and syllabus requirements must encompass a holistic approach to curriculum planning.

Sociologist Philip Jackson coined the term ‘ hidden curriculum’ in 1968, although the concept has been around much longer. Jackson argues that what is taught in schools is more than the essence of the curriculum. He thought that schools should be understood as a socialization process where messages are communicated to students through their experience of being in school, not just from things that are unequivocally taught. From another perspective, “ the hidden curriculum is... something coming across to the pupils which may never be spoken in the English lesson or prayed about in assembly. They are picking-up an approach to living and an attitude to learning” (Meighan, 1981). The hidden curriculum, then, provides a leeway for educators to impress upon students their values, beliefs and most importantly, the ‘ dominant’ cultural capital.

The concept of cultural capital, developed by Pierre Bourdieu, is “ a set of tools and skills acquired through experience that includes knowledge about how to present oneself vis-à-vis relations of power” (Dalmage & Isserles, 2000, p. 160). Bourdieu attempts to expand the understanding of capital to something more than just economic by identifying culture as a form of capital. His concern in relation to cultural capital was with its continual

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transmission in ways that perpetuate social inequalities. Bourdieu explains school success by the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the family milieu rather than by measures of individual talent or achievement. For him, ability is socially constructed and is the result of individuals having access to large amounts of the dominant cultural capital. Cultural capital includes one's language, etiquette, preferences, and taste, which Bourdieu (1977, p. 82) terms "subtle modalities in the relationship to culture and language." The hidden curriculum therefore has a greater impact than the formal curriculum in the transmission of cultural capital. This is apparent as the formal curriculum is limited to the school context (academic) and within prescribed hours while the hidden curriculum factors in the social construct of individuals and the society in which they live. These subtle modalities are impressed upon them unintentionally within the delivery of the curriculum and usually have a big influence on them. Take for example teaching a Social Studies lesson on democracy at the secondary level. If the students are not given a voice in the classroom and are treated irrationally, they may have a negative perspective about the nature of society.

Jackson writing in 1968 contends that the hidden curriculum "emphasized skills such as learning to wait quietly, patiently, exercising restraint, completing work, cooperating with others, being punctual and respecting peer differences" (Margolis, n. d. pg 5). These features clearly had nothing to do with educational goals. These educational goals were always covered in the formal curriculum and neglect the inculcation of life skills that would promote social change and conformity, preventing any state of anomie (normlessness) in schools and mainstream society. Robert Dreeben as cited

in Margolis article “ The Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education” contends that these skills taught students to form “ transient social relationships” and accept responsibility for their actions. He further argued that the hidden curriculum taught students values such as independence and achievement which will be essential for their transition from childhood to adulthood. Within the secondary schools, work is usually assigned by teachers with no indication that it must be done. The hidden curriculum encompasses such an enquiry approach where students must create their own learning experiences rather than relying on the teacher for strict guidance. Such guidance is usually systematic and deliberate and falls within the formal curriculum and subsequently does not teach the value of independence or any other life skill. What usually happens is where student’s thoughts are merely those of the teacher.

An argument put forward by Palermo 1990, stated that “ These days we talk a lot about objectives, subjects, timetables, syllabuses, standards and technologies. These are all important issues, but they seem to me like the tip of the iceberg, what we can see and hear and talk about: the “ overt” part of a curriculum. But what we do not see is just as important, and perhaps more: it is the hidden or “ covert” curriculum, and this is made up of what people – teachers, students, parents, administrators – bring to it, in terms of their beliefs, attitudes, expectations, motivations. It seems to me that this “ submerged” curriculum is largely unknown, rarely spoken about, and very often underestimated. Quite frankly, she is right. Her argument is that while the formal curriculum is necessary, the hidden curriculum provides a more holistic approach in ensuring that students’ cognitive, psychological and

behavioural traits are taken into consideration when devising a curriculum.

The hidden curriculum although unintended usually facilitates the transmission of beliefs with affect how students make decisions regarding their life. This curriculum provides students with a voice in the classroom and does not follow a systematic and deliberate approach to teaching and learning.

The hidden curriculum cannot be used in isolation from the formal curriculum. Both complement each other and are essential for the academic, vocational and social development of learners. The formal approach stresses academics within prescribed hours while the hidden curriculum emphasize students forming social transient relationships and the acquisition of societal norms, values and beliefs which in turn affects one desire to participate in deviant acts. This is largely due to the unintended social modalities impressed upon them during the teaching and learning process. While researchers argue that the hidden curriculum elevates and perpetuates the culture of the dominant class – a process termed cultural reproduction, they will agree that this curriculum proves more beneficial to oneself and the society in which they live.