

TIMO AIRAKSINEN

*Uniwersytet, Helsinki*

## **Education and the Praxiology of the Hidden Curriculum**

### **1. Introduction**

Education has its aims, but that is not all. Education achieves many things but only some of them are among its explicitly stated goals. The Hidden Curriculum does its own work. I will distinguish between training, schooling, and educating, in a technical sense of the word. It is also necessary to remark that I provide a rather narrow and technical definitions of training, schooling, and education. They can also be understood as synonyms, let us admit that. I will ask how the hidden curriculum works in each case. Next I try to show that, praxiologically speaking, the role of the hidden curriculum becomes stronger when we proceed from training through schooling to education. At the same time we notice how problematic it is to talk about the praxiological efficiency in such cases. Nevertheless it is true that the hidden curriculum is an efficient and effective part of education.

### **2. The Case of Training**

What is training? Training means becoming able to achieve some goals which are simple, well defined and repetitive. One can be trained to kick the ball, for instance. One can be trained to distinguish between nuances of the

smell and taste of wine. A dog can be trained not to pull on the leash. This is the essence of training, in a narrow sense of the word. It does not matter whether one trains alone or has a trainer. One just needs systematic practice in order to be able to master a skill or a task.

### 3. Schooling

The term ‘schooling’ refers to cases where a learner acquires a skill whose definition cannot be given without mentioning a social institution and the social fact derived from it. I know this is not a common definition, but it can easily be seen to make sense. Let us take an example. A trained nurse is not actually ‘trained’ in the sense of the term used above. Her skills and the corresponding goals are too complicated to allow that. What is meant by a ‘trained nurse’ is this: a nursing student needs schooling to become a ‘trained nurse, in the sense that he or she participates in an educational program which has its stated values, official requirements and goals, and an explicit curriculum. This is to say that in order to become a ‘trained nurse’ she needs training in an adequately institutionalized context which can be called a school. We can also say that in order to understand what we mean the term ‘trained nurse’ we need to refer to an existing schooling program, or a school. Schooling is an important and common form of education in an advanced, enlightened, industrial society. Our basic socialization depends on schools, understood as systematic and institutionalized educational programs. Such a school instills the elements of its own to the student who acquires not only new skills but also values and an existential outlook from this source. For instance, we are schooled to accept a democratic society and operate in it. In other words, we are democratic citizens. Notice that the term ‘democratic’ refers to the schooling system we have attended and passed. One more remark is needed, namely, schools teach skills and in this sense they train their students. But there is a great difference between a boy who learns how to kick the ball from his peers and a boy who goes to a football school and becomes a footballer in this sense. There is a dramatic difference between kicking the ball and playing the game. Notice also that it is possible to school animals, such as horses. Yet, there is a form of education which applies only to humans<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> See J. E. McClellan, *Philosophy of Education*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1976.

#### 4. Education as *Bildung*

Education can be used as an umbrella concept which covers, among other things, training, schooling, and *Bildung*. The last term should be understood in its classical, idealistic, enlightened sense. Then it means a holistic goal of becoming a better person and a fuller human being due to the education one receives. Also involved are social processes, their values and duties which one learns to accept and cultivate. In this sense education entails human growth and flourishing socially, interpersonally, and individually.

It is not easy to understand how such an ideal situation as required by the ideology of *Bildung* is achieved. Yet many educational programs try to provide an answer. Religious education is a prime example as its goal is to make the person worthy of salvation. Art education is important to *Bildung* and so are the many forms of educational programs which promote the virtues of the good citizen in a democratic society. It is difficult to imagine that an enlightened educational system would not pay attention to the goals and methods of *Bildung*.

A historical anecdote is perhaps illuminating. Aristotle is often quoted as saying that one becomes a virtuous person by acting virtuously. This is to say that he or she becomes courageous by acting repeatedly so that this noble virtue becomes part of his psychological constitution or character. The Marquis de Sade makes an ironic comment on this by saying that one becomes vicious by performing vicious deeds until the voice of one's conscience dies out<sup>2</sup>. Then one is free and can fulfil one's mission in life. Why is this problematic? The problem is that Aristotle makes it sound like learning to kick the ball without paying any attention to learning the game itself. Virtue requires training as a necessary condition of its learning, but it also requires schooling to teach the social and interpersonal aspects of virtue to the candidate. However, the main point must be *Bildung*. Virtue does not exist without it as courage is nothing but a dangerous trait if it is not a feature of a well-formed mind and personality.

---

<sup>2</sup> See T. Airaksinen, *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade*, Routledge, London, 1994.

## 5. Hidden Curriculum

What is the Hidden Curriculum (HC)? This is an appropriate question because the term is often used without definition. Yet it is not an intuitively clear term nor is it an everyday or commonsense term. HC is one of those highly problematic notions which are at the same time technical and seemingly undefinable. Normally we think that everyday terms are undefinable and technical terms have a clear meaning. In this respect HC is like Michael Polanyi's Tacit Knowledge (TK) to which it is related<sup>3</sup>.

The following can be used to explain the meaning of HC:

Although not the first sociologist to use the concept, the phrase „hidden curriculum” was originally coined by Brian Jackson („Life In Classrooms”, 1968) to draw attention to the idea that schools do more than simply aid the transmission of knowledge between one generation and the next. Jackson argues that we need to understand „education” as a socialization process. That is, a process that involves the transmission of norms and values as well as a body of socially-approved knowledge (that also involves socially-derived conceptions of what constitutes valid knowledge, acceptable levels of understanding and so forth). We have to understand not just the social construction of knowledge (the way cultures define and produce what they consider to be valid forms of knowledge), but also the way the teaching and learning process is socially-constructed. In this respect, Jackson summarizes this idea when he argues:

„The hidden curriculum refers to ways in which pupils learn to accept the denial and interruption of their personal desires and wishes”.

This is not, of course, the only – or even the main – definition of the hidden curriculum, but it does encapsulate Jackson's argument that pupils, if they are to succeed within the education system, have to „learn how to learn”. That is, they have to learn to conform not just to the formal rules of the school but also to the informal rules, beliefs and attitudes perpetuated through the socialization process. The basic idea behind the concept of the hidden curriculum, therefore, is that pupils learn things that are not actually taught in the formal curriculum and, in this respect, the

---

<sup>3</sup> M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post- Critical Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958.

concept of a hidden curriculum refers to the way the learning process is organized<sup>4</sup>.

TK can be explained as follows:

When we are tacitly involved in a process-of-knowing we act without distance. This describes how and why we take things „for granted”. The individual changes, „adapts”, the concepts in the light of experiences and reinterpret the language used. When new words or concepts are brought into an older system of language, both affect each other. The system itself enriches what the individual has brought into it<sup>5</sup>.

In the following quotation Ivan Illich uses HC and TK in a negative context. It seems that TK is value-neutral, which is easy to accept as it is a form of knowledge anyway. But HC can be used negatively too, when it means dysfunctional content of learning or somehow unacceptable educational goals. Illich writes:

They school them [students, especially the poor] to confuse process and substance.... The pupil is thereby „schooled” to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is „schooled” to accept service in place of value<sup>6</sup>.

Illich’s radically negative thesis is that the school curriculum produces learning effects and results which are negative, that is, dysfunctional and valueless. Teaching itself becomes an intrinsic value, grade advancement is the main goal, a diploma the main achievement, and fluency the key ability. None of these are mentioned in the curriculum and they would not be seen to be valuable as such, if they were perceived and discussed openly. All of them are the products of HC and they represent TK in a negative value context. TK might be always necessary but in this context the pupils should get more.

Is HC always negative? This can be argued for, as follows. Any educational curriculum is necessarily designed to represent the highest values of the community in a historical situation and to promote the best possible educational content. Of course many curricula are less than ideally good, but from a philosophical point of view any curriculum has its normative foundation. It is as good as possible. Now, HC diverges from this

---

<sup>4</sup> [Http://www.sociology.org.uk/teceltl.htm](http://www.sociology.org.uk/teceltl.htm).

<sup>5</sup> [Http://www.sveiby.com/articles/Polanyi.html](http://www.sveiby.com/articles/Polanyi.html).

<sup>6</sup> *Deschooling Society*, London, Marion Boyars, 1996, p. 1.

curriculum which is the best possible one. Thus, it is worse than it. The logic is clear: if the curriculum is the best plan, any HC cannot be better than it, and, most likely, worse than it. Of course, one may argue against such simple logic on empirical grounds. One may suggest that in many cases the curriculum is not ideally good, and in those cases HC is likely to be better than it. Perhaps HC benefits from some kind of spontaneous gravitation toward adequacy, functionality, and value? Such a happy chance is possible but unlikely. And in case it is invisible and utterly unpredictable. However, a philosopher must use logical arguments and refrain from the use of empirical premises, however tempting they may be. My conclusion is that no educational project or system should rely on HC and its TK.

## 6. The Comparison of the Fields of Education

My main point is that HC has a diminishing role and function when we proceed from *Bildung* to schooling and training. In the first case we have hardly anything else than HC and in the last case we have hardly any effects of HC left. What does this mean? I will also show that, surprisingly enough, the greater role of HC is, the more acceptable and beneficial its effects are. Therefore, the pessimistic considerations of HC apply only to those cases where its role is secondary to the curriculum. This is easy to understand: if the curriculum is rudimentary and its role more or less undefined, HC can do a better job. In other words, HC can be better than the curriculum itself, if the latter is left weak and undefined.

Education as *Bildung* is open to HC as its central elements cannot be captured by any official curricula. It seems impossible that we could teach ethics, virtue, creativity, civilized living, and other central features of enlightenment and good life. We can teach religion, philosophy, art appreciation, artistic techniques, creative writing, sport, and ecological facts, but that is different. I give an example taken from my own field, philosophy, as it is taught in Finnish high-schools. This example can be generalized to all of the other fields mentioned above.

A Finnish parliament accepted guidelines for a high-school philosophy curriculum emphasize its role in *Bildung*. The students are supposed to learn not only argumentative skills but also acquire a deeper understanding of society, science, and life. Philosophy is supposed to enable their human

growth and contribute to their maturation. For this purpose the students learn ethics, epistemology, some informal logic, and philosophical psychology. Insights into these areas are said to be crucially important. At the level of the curriculum, a causal connection is seen between learning philosophy and human growth, or *Bildung*. But what is the truth? In actual fact the teachers cannot create the required causal connection, which is of course understandable as the aims and goals of the curriculum are too lofty. What the teachers at schools tend to do is to teach History of Philosophy in a simplified form. Many of them teach straightforward History of Ideas according to the standard western canon. Some teachers try to go a little deeper. For instance, Plato is taught as if he promoted a simple two-worlds-model, that is, forms and facts are in their separate worlds. The Cartesian dualism is emphasized as if it were accepted by the modern cognitive scientists. In ethics the pupils learn Kant's Categorical Imperative and its formal version as if it were a simplified decision rule. His mention of the laws of nature is systematically confused with the positive laws of the state. If something good happens to the students in a philosophy class, it must be strictly due to HC, the hidden curriculum. They are in fact capable finding a kernel of truth in this confused material and step by step they become aware of the consolation of philosophy in their own life. Or at least one must hope so. The students will become aware of the nature of ethical considerations as something not merely subjective and something which depends on their subjective feeling and opinion. But this cannot be thought directly.

I already quoted Illich about HC in school and schooling. This case is as complicated as it is mysterious, but there is no room here for its comprehensive treatment. Some remarks must be sufficient. Students learn mathematics, as they should, according to the curriculum. They learn to master mathematical skills and apply them to, say, physics and everyday problems. They are well trained in mathematics in an institutionalized setting, in school, science, society. They have become minor mathematicians (no irony here). But HC is at work here too. For instance, the students learn that some are gifted in mathematics some are not. They also learn that males are better than females, which reinforces their basic genderized stereotypes. All this contributes strongly to their *un-Bildung*, which, paradoxically, may make them more successful members of their own community. In this case the effect of HC is clearly undesirable. It seems that HC works efficiently in schooling and its effects cannot be uniformly desirable. In direct competition

with the curriculum HC manages well, although one hopes it would not. More examples can be found easily. HC reproduces the inequitable, class based, genderized society with superficial values. At the individual psychological level HC seems to work against the effects *Bildung*. One can only guess why this is so. Perhaps the ideals of *Bildung* are too demanding and destabilizing, if realized in full, and thus they need to be efficiently countered by HC at the level of schooling.

Training contains only minimal HC, which however is more than zero. If I am taught how to spell and read, this is what I learn. By leaning it at school, which is an institution, I will meet HC. And it is part of my *Bildung* that I can read and write, as a civilized person and a citizen must be able to do. Such observations show how closely connected training, schooling, *Bildung* are, and how difficult it is to deny the effects of HC in the field of training. But as long as we pay attention only to training as training, the role of HC must be negligible. A goal is set and training is supposed to meet it. Think about leaning how to kick football. If I do it at school as part of my schooling, I learn how I manage in relation to my classmates. HC comes into the picture. But if I just train how to kick, and I am a bad kicker, I may drop the whole program and do something else. Hence I did not learn how to kick the ball but neither did I learn anything else, about myself, my friends, and the modern competitive world of sports.

## **7. Praxiological Considerations: Effectiveness and Efficiency**

Praxiological tasks have their three key elements, effectiveness, efficiency, and ethics. Here we deal only with the first two. By effectiveness is meant the ability to reach the stated goal. Efficiency has its many different interpretations, for instance a static and a dynamic one. Static efficiency means a situation where all the resources are in use. A library where all the books are borrowed at least once is a good example. In other world, there is no waste. Dynamic efficiency means that minimal resources produce the desired effects. An engine which has minimal fuel consumption is an example of this. Let me apply these three concepts to HC in general. I try to show what kind of difficulty we may expect to face.

In regard to effectiveness, it is interesting to ask whether HC makes it more difficult to meet the stated goals of the curricula. Logically speaking the prima

facie answer is in the negative. If HC is not visible, it may not interfere in training, teaching, and schooling. The official goals can be reached as they are stated. But even if there need not be any interference at the level of curriculum goals, an indirect source of interference can be detected, that is, TK. HC brings about TK which may well interfere with and damage the aims of the curriculum. A simple example is sufficient. In teaching mathematics, the female students learn (TK) that they cannot learn algebra. They never realize that this is so, but this TK still makes it more difficult, or even impossible, to reach the goals of the mathematics program. If such dysfunctional effects occur, they must be very difficult to detect, evaluate, and counter.

Let me make one more remark in this context. It does not seem appropriate to discuss the effectiveness of HC as its goals are never stated or even known. Of course we can do it metaphorically, in the sense that some processes of HC produce strong TK. In physical education one may say that it teaches the students the basic laws of liberalist competition where the winner takes it all and the same persons always win. But this is never the goal of physical education. And it is not normally known if such effects are real or just possible, and this is why the discussion cannot be taken seriously.

Finally, let us discuss HC and efficiency in education, the static interpretation first. If all the educational resources, material, mental, and economical, are in use, the process is efficient. The question is, if the curriculum is realized in an efficient context, how is HC realized? The question seems to be irrational as such because HC is an unintentional and covert process which does not need its own resources. HC is parasitic but it does not consume any resources directly. Praxiologically speaking we cannot talk about its efficiency. This is somehow embarrassing as we might intuitively demand that all goal directed and successful processes can also be evaluated and rank-ordered in terms of their relative effectiveness. This does not seem to be the case.

What about dynamic efficiency? Here the conclusions need not be the same as those reached when we talked about static efficiency. Yet the following points are only tentative. They need elaboration and further study. Suppose an educational program and its curriculum are maximally efficient (dynamically). Minimal resources are needed to reach the stated goals. How does HC behave in these circumstances, compared to those cases in which the investments are larger (and the same goals are reached)? My conjecture is, and this may be empirically tested, that the more efficient the system is the

more effects of HC it shows in the end. The less efficient systems show less marked influence of HC among its students.

The rule is, accordingly: more dynamic efficiency leaves more room for HC to be realized.

The reason for such a suggested rule is simple. If the resources are smaller then more informal, spontaneous, improvised, and uncontrollable methods of instruction, teaching, and training are applied to reach the goals of the curriculum. The teachers are not so competent. Teaching equipment is lacking. The financial situation is prone to be in crisis. Efficiency does not imply smooth operation, unlike effectiveness, but just the ability to reach the goal using minimal resources. Thus, all these factors create ideal conditions for HC to flourish. Incompetent teachers teach in a less systematic way and create an unpredictable environment. By doing so, they teach HC. In a rich educational environment the resources can be used to control the activities so that less room is left for HC. And whatever HC emerges, it can be detected and revealed, after which it is no longer HC proper. Extra resources allow you to do the work more explicitly and in a controlled manner. Those resources can be used for extra checks which keep HC at bay, even if this does not contribute the efficiency of the educational work and its projects. To control HC is expensive, mainly because one is fighting a nameless and invisible enemy.

Timo Airaksinen  
*Uniwersytet, Helsinki*

## EDUCATION AND THE PRAXIOLOGY OF THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

Abstract: The intuitive idea of this paper is very simple, namely, when the educational work progresses from training, through schooling towards Bildung the role of the Hidden Curriculum increases. I analyse the concepts mentioned above one after the other and pay special attention to that of the Hidden Curriculum. It is not an easy concept to understand. It also seems like a potentially harmful factor in education. Finally I introduce the key praxiological notions of efficiency and effectiveness and consider how this changes our view of the role of the Hidden Curriculum in education. My conclusion is that praxiological considerations can be used to keep the effects of the Hidden Curriculum at bay.

key words: training, schooling, Bildung, hidden curriculum