

## Hidden curriculum: Does it matter in a Ghanaian school setting

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### **Abstract**

Preferably, the focus of every school curriculum should be a complete merger between the formal (written) and hidden (unwritten) curriculum. But as it is, scholars and concerned citizens assert whether the hidden curriculum should be of concern in a schools setting, which presupposes that the formal curriculum is considered paramount to the hidden curriculum. This paper, therefore examines whether the hidden curriculum should be given premium in a school settings. The interpretative phenomenological research design was employed. Qualitative data were obtained by way of interviews with nine (9) teachers. Results reveals that the hidden curriculum elements that prevails in school settings fall in the area of teacher demeanor, teacher choice of language and teacher teaching method. The initiation of total development and assimilation of social values are considered as the essence of the hidden curriculum in schools. In all, the findings indicate that the hidden curriculum matters in school setting. It is therefore suggested that teachers see the hidden curriculum as another medium to teach students unknowingly. Furthermore, teachers and administrators should be cautious in their choice of words in their quest of communication, having it in mind that, their words create reality for students.

**Keywords:** Hidden curriculum; School setting; Teachers.

### **Introduction**

Education as said by R.S. Peters is the initiation of an individual into ‘an intrinsically worthwhile activity’ (cited in Kelly, 2004, p.47). By implication, education is to transform and expose learners into a spacious community that thrives on morals and ignore amoral acts. To this end, education functions as a threshold of values present and not presents to be conveyed to coming generations so as to be abreast with certainty in their society (Yüksel, 2006). In this era of modernization, education serves as a medium of bringing character formation in students which teachers, who are seen as agents of the change, are supposed to acknowledge the ethical complexities attaché to their profession since they impact on their students morally (Dally &

Toomey, 2011; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2005; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011, Zuhail, 2012). To Narvaez and Lapsley (in press), teachers impact values on their students in the practices they engage their students in, that is, insisting on correct response form students; encouraging students to seek the truth of a matter; establishing classroom routines, enforcing discipline among student and finally, encouraging excellence in students' actions which at the end foster a degree of development in students.

With this in mind, the development of students with a formal curriculum should be in balance with the social and cultural aspects of any school, which in this place is the second curriculum or hidden curriculum so as to ensure a holistic development of students (Zuhail, 2012). Currently, the development of students in the education enterprise is seen as a formalized standardized intellectual activity (Sager, 2013). To this end, the focus of education is placing of much premium on content such as history and social studies at the expense of the other components unconsciously taught in schools. These unconscious components which is in this case are called hidden curriculum encompasses behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge that are communicated without conscious intent, and it is also represented by accumulation of values communicated indirectly, through actions and words that are part of everyday life in a school (Dickerson, 2007; Wear, 2009).

The missionized statements of formal schools today are all geared towards transforming and shaping learners to become fitting members in a worthwhile society through the school (Ghosh, 2008; Marsh, 1997; Stone, 2005). As a society, schools are expected to enforce or de-emphasize behaviors and attitudes demonstrated by students through its systems. According to Meighan (1981), these systems are not much given attention compared to the operational school curriculum. Could it be that teachers and administrator do not place premium on the hidden curriculum systems in their schools, since on a different pedestal, scholars and educationists continues to contend that schools should focus on higher learning through stipulations in the formal curriculum at the expense of the hidden curriculum (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1994; Dickerson, 2007, Kimberlee, 2013). Informed by these contentions, this paper embarked on an interpretative phenomenological approach in explaining teachers' positions as whether the hidden curriculum is of essence in a Ghanaian school setting. Specifically, the following questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are teachers' perceptions on the hidden curriculum element that transpire in their schools?
2. What are teachers' positions on the essence of the hidden curriculum in a school?

### **Theoretical Grounding**

Hidden curriculum conceptions have been looked at by different scholars from different lenses (Kentli, 2009; Ruff, 2013; Sager, 2013). To Apple (1993), the hidden curriculum aspect in a school serves as reinforcement to basic rules circling the nature of conflict in schools. With this, it brings to light plausible boundaries that students are expected to internalized in their daily activities. From an explicit end, the hidden curriculum talks about the rules and regulations that students are expected to adhere to in a school so as to avoid the situation of coming into conflict with school authorities. Hence in the words of Durkheim (1961):

*“there is a whole system of rules in the school that predetermine the child’s conduct. He must come to class regularly; he must arrive at a specified time and with an appropriate bearing and attitude. He must not disrupt things in class. He must have learned his lessons, done his homework, and have done so reasonably well, etc. There are, therefore, a host of obligations that the child is required to shoulder. Together they constitute the discipline of the school. It is through the practice of school discipline that we can inculcate the spirit of discipline in the child.”* (p.148)

In the works of Philip Jackson (cited in Kentli, 2009), the features of the hidden curriculum are manifested in the classroom life which are inherent in schools’ social relations. By this, the values, dispositions and socio-behavioral expectation that bring reward to students in the classroom situations are features of the hidden curriculum, which are seen as learning to wait quietly, exercising restraints, completing work, partaking in group work, showing allegiance to both teachers and peers, being neat and punctual, and conducting oneself courteously. Thus, the essence of the features is to construct worthwhile and meaningful pattern of judging behaviours that transpires in classroom. This, according to Livesey (2006), will also thrive on social consensus that involves the use of a commonly accepted norms, values, and beliefs. Parallel to the latter, Bloom (2006) introduces the assumptions underpinning the hidden curriculum in the light of schooling and learning. To Bloom (2006) learners demonstrate of knowledge of learning that a teacher is in control or is the center of attention when a teacher teaches in front of a class which, to a degree, inform students that the teacher is the center of attention in the class. Also, to him, the value deduced from a particular topic is communicated in respect to the time spent on the topic, the tone of voice, and lastly how the topic is treated e.g. highlighted or trivialized. Hence, these components on the large extent communicate effectively and have impact on teaching and learning in classroom.

Kern (2007) argues that the hidden curriculum operate under the values within a school and a classroom. The values to him are inherent in the disciplinary measures, the stated goals, and also the communication between the school, the community, and the daily schedules on the school time table and duration for class instruction (Moroye, 2009). Thus, the inherent dispositions carried on by teachers coupled with stated classroom rules, guidelines and goals all carry the message of the hidden curriculum (Ruff, 2013). To Sheikhzade (2011), the hidden curriculum also consists of implicit messages in the socio-educational atmosphere of a school which results in impact on the behavior interaction between teacher and student and school environment at large.

## **Review of Literature**

Studies conducted on variables relating on the concept of hidden curriculum are overwhelming, but to these studies, only a few scholars outside Ghana have delved into teachers perspectives on the hidden curriculum in formalized schools (Booher-Jennings,2008; Lea & Griggs,2005). By definition Vang (2006) postulates that hidden curriculum are instructional norms and values not openly acknowledged by teachers or school officials but form part of the elements in a school context. To Sambell and McDowel (1998), hidden curriculum are “an opposite metaphor to describe the shadowy, ill-defined and amorphous nature of that which is implicit and embedded in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational

interaction”(p. 391). In other words, hidden curriculum is seen as various elements in school climates that produce changes in students’ values, norms, and perceptions but are not written in any official document. In conformity to the latter, Kelly (2004) categorically postulate that hidden curriculum refer to:

*“those things which pupils learn at school because of the way in which the work of the school is planned and organized, and through the materials provided, but which are not in themselves overtly included in the planning or even in the consciousness of those responsible for the school arrangements.”(p.5).*

In a study conducted by Kohlberg (1981, 1983), it was established that hidden curriculum exert pressure on the moral development of students in schools. By this, Kohlberg (1981, 1983) indicated that the aspect of been discipline in a classroom and avoiding certain amoral act like cheating are values that are catered for by the hidden curriculum and for that matter policy makers should have in mind that formal curriculum cannot curtail the problems faced by societies without the help of the hidden curriculum. In view of this, Eisner(1985) claim that the other aspect not taught by the formal curriculum is of educational significant and in his own words he says that

*“ what is not taught may be as educationally significant as what is taught: I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem” (p. 97).*

In effect, Eisner (1985) asserts that hidden curriculum is of importance and complete ignorance of it would jeopardize those unconcern. This then means that constituents of it should be recognized which to Glatthorn and Jailall (2009) fall under the activities carried out by teachers and administrators namely: time allocation for a subject, space allocation for a subject, student discipline, physical appearance, student activity programs and communication which to a degree produces constant variables that bring changes in learners in school environment.

In a study conducted by Vajargah and Choukadeh (2006), it was revealed that the hidden curriculum brings to the awareness of students certain skills and viewpoints such as respect, tolerance, honesty, patriotism, democracy, obligation and responsibility. These awareness creations imbibe in students virtues expected of them as members of societies.

Similarly, a study carried out by Hashemi **et.al.** (2011) also established that hidden curriculum has positive and negative effects on the education of students. To him the irresponsibility of students to societal ills is as a result of the learning situations they are exposed to in the school environment. Thus, students’ learning to communicate and work collaboratively prepares their personality to be stronger, effective, and helpful for society.

## **Methodology**

The study is grounded on the qualitative approach. The choice of the qualitative approach according to Curry, Nembhard and Bradley (2009) is to investigate comprehensively complex phenomena that are difficult to measure quantitatively. In accordance with this viewpoint, the interpretative phenomenological approach was used to explore participant conception and perception of their experience about the phenomenon under study (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This approach was adopted on the grounds that there was the need for an ‘insider perspective’ of phenomenon to be examined (Conrad, 1987). The approach was also considered on the assertion

made by Miles and Huberman (cited in Oppong, 2014, p. 154) that it is “fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, process and structures of their lives”. The purposive sampling was considered for the study. This according to Welman and Kruger (1999) is the most important kind of non-probability sampling that helps the researcher to identify the primary participants and also for the purpose of the study to look for people who have experienced the phenomenon to be researched. To Oliver (2006), the choice of the techniques is also based on the premise that participants have special knowledge of the research issues and are willing to participate in the research. In all, a sample size of nine (9) teachers was used. This, according to Boyd (2001), in phenomenological research two (2) to ten (10) respondents are sufficient to reach saturation. An informal conversational interview was used for the study (Turner, 2010). This according to Gall and Borg (2003) is a type of interview which is purported “...entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in a natural interaction, typically one that occurs as part of ongoing participant observation fieldwork” (p. 239). The responses solicited were sorted into categories and were analyzed thematically so as to put respondents’ views into perspectives (Marais & Meier, 2004).

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Teachers’ perceptions on hidden curriculum element that transpire in their schools**

The study basically embarks on a search to elicit information from teachers on their views on the hidden curriculum and its relevance in schools. On this premise, research question one solicited the responses of teachers on their perception of the hidden curriculum element in their school. Under this section, respondents’ views were categorized under the following heading: teacher demeanor; teacher choice of language, and lastly, teacher-teaching method.

From the interviews conducted, interviewees’ responses on the hidden curriculum on teacher demeanor were unanimous. The respondents opined that in their own view they succumb to the idea they are in school to teach and learn respectively as prescribed by the formal curriculum, however, the way they are to conduct themselves in the school vicinity is not explicitly stated in the school rules. For that matter, they take cognizance of what they deem fit and apt for the school environment put up best conduct. The response of the teachers captures this clearly:

*“The dressing of a teachers forms part of the hidden curriculum. Although it is not stated explicitly the dress a teacher is supposed to wear, if as a teacher I do not dress well it would have a negative effect on my students’ behavior”* (Respondent TH, November 13, 2015).

Another respondent remarked that:

*“the dress I bring to school are normal that my students will be proud of since I dress modestly and I expect them to learn from me even though the unwritten curriculum does prescribe so...”* (Respondent TE, November 14, 2015).

In a follow-up to probe the reasons why these teachers assert that the their conduct in terms of their dress forms an element in the hidden curriculum and why they dress as such, one of the respondents asserted that since the hidden curriculum is a curriculum that focuses on elements not explicitly taught or formalized in school instruction, they do their best to also teach their student how to dress by demonstrating it themselves. Another respondent indicated:

*“If perhaps I dress shabbily it will inform my students that I am not a serious teacher, if really want to make an impact on my students learning I’ve to dress well so as to create the serene environment that foster discipline and respect in my class... Also for learning to be possible there is the need for connection between the teacher, subject matter and the learner, the teacher carries the subject matter and if a teacher does not present himself well he/she should not expect his students to take him serious in his teaching.”* (Respondent TX, November 14, 2015).

These responses indicate that teachers perceive their conduct in terms of “*what they dress*” and “*how they dress*” as profound element forming part of the components of the hidden curriculum transpiring in their school. It can be inferred that teachers have positive regard for their student learning outcomes but whenever they are planning to teach the planned instruction, they also factor the unplanned instruction that is- how their dress would compel students to take their lesson serious. As rightly said teachers are compelled to put up a positive impression before their students because they have their students in mind and yearn for them to learn from them as exemplars. Hence, as said by Kenner and McCune (2002) and Glatthorn and Jailall (2009) teachers’ appearances form part of the hidden curriculum and have effect on classroom atmosphere. The effect is brought forth as a result of teachers dressing professionally which on the one hand influences students’ impression and the course of teaching. This is in conformity to Barocas and Karoly (1972) studies which posited that teachers’ dress create an impression that will have an effect on students through time. Thus, teachers demeanor on how they dress to school exert an amount of influence on students learning which transpires unconsciously through to the behaviours exhibited by students in all facet of their life, that is socially, economically and politically which last permanently in their minds.

With regards to how languages used by teachers form an element or component of a hidden curriculum, participants’ responses were unanimous. The respondents remarked that the choice of words a teacher uses in his language construction and how he goes about it is a vital component of the hidden curriculum. This is evident in the submission of one of the respondents who remarked that:

*“...the way a teacher talks in the class forms part of the hidden curriculum...children (students) learn most lessons through observation than through any other medium, so if they observe a teacher for instance talking in a particular manner which is not ethical or does not encourage societal values, students will learn from that...”* (Respondent TH, November 13, 2015)

In another response a participant remarked:

*“the choice of language a teacher use in classrooms forms part of the hidden curriculum...insulting students in the course of trying to reinforce a positive behaviour whiles teaching does not fall in the purview of the written curriculum but that of the hidden curriculum which even emphasis a positive reinforcement in the form encouragement and not insult.”* (Respondent ES, November 15, 2015).

The responses show that participants are in consonance with the idea that the involuntary or unconscious assertions carried out by teachers in classroom discussions form part of the hidden curriculum. Also, teachers teach through well-rehearsed plans of instruction at which they talk unconsciously to their students. These claims concord Taylor’s (2008) study which revealed that unconscious lessons are often taught through language - not precisely through what is said but

the ways in which they are said of which instructors have to be vigilant of. In a hunt to probe why respondents posit that teachers' language form an element in the hidden curriculum, a respondent asserted that:

*“if education is to train people to become morally fit for a society, then the language a teacher use should be of the best, devoid of insults but sound judgment that depict and unearth the hidden values in society which is to be taught by teachers through their action, especially their words...”*(Respondent AN, November 16, 2015).

From this, it is clear that participants are aware that the way and manner teachers' words in language emanate unconsciously form part of the hidden curriculum which manifests in students actions consciously. Thus as said by Sager (2013), words do not always create reality for those who speak it but the postures at which they are spoken unconsciously shape the view of the people of the world (*society*).

On the issue of the art of teacher-teaching method falling under the domain of the hidden curriculum that transpires in classroom setting, respondents undisputedly posited that though the formalized curriculum stipulates the approach a teacher should use in teaching an instruction, that notwithstanding, respondents assert that the formal curriculum to a degree cannot be employed in all aspects of the teaching context. In consonance with their stance, a respondent remarked:

*“...my students are unique beings and sometimes when they are faced with problems, I do something outside the formal curriculum by introducing some jokes in my lesson... the jokes enlighten my classroom and even release the stress and the emotional traumas my students bring to the classroom.”* (Respondent LS, November 13, 2015).

Thus, teachers' discretion on the choice of jokes as a method employed in teaching is influenced by teachers' intuition that learners are ill-prepared for learning because of their demeanor and for that matter teachers go outside the prescribed curriculum to introduce the innovative aspects of teaching so as to enliven a classroom setting. In furtherance, a participant asserted, when asked why they sometimes pay heed to the use of jokes in class teaching:

*“...if I decide to be strict and go by the formalize curriculum my students may be in the class but will not participate fully in the class discussion. Thus in order to involve everyone and cater for their needs there is the need to make the classroom lively which sometimes is catered for by jokes...”*. (Respondent CH, November 17, 2015).

The responses from the respondents show that teacher have much concern of the well-being of their students at the expense of the formalized instruction they are to comply. In doing this, they offset some of the duties expected of them in the classroom by introducing some intuitive element apt to meet the needs of learners in a given context of teaching. With this in mind, teachers show great deal of concern by going to the extent of demonstrating societal values itching to the ears of students so as to ensure that they chip in to the learning process.

### **Teachers' positions on the essence of hidden curriculum in a school**

The second research question under this study sought to find out from teachers whether the place of the hidden curriculum in the classroom is of relevance and whether the matter should be of concern to appropriate stakeholders. Under this theme, balance in students' development and assimilation of social values were issues addressed by participants.

Information gathered from the interviews indicates that respondents asserted that the bringing of balance in the total development of students makes the place of the hidden curriculum in classroom learning relevant. By this, respondents are of the view that the hidden curriculum caters for the aspect needed for the developments of students, which to a degree are not prescribed by the formalized curriculum. To this a respondent remarked:

*“... the hidden curriculum should be practiced alongside the written curriculum. This will help shape the total developments of students. Also since we want the best for our students we should also consider given premium to the hidden curriculum so as to ensure equilibrium in their development.”* (Respondent CH, November 17, 2015).

This demonstrates that participants are bringing to light that the formal curriculum cannot initiate a total development in students, that is cognitively, affectively and practically, morally, socially or culturally. Thus, the place of the hidden curriculum is to cater for the moral, affective or cultural aspects which to a lesser extent is most often neglected at the expense of the cognitive base and practical base of learning. The role of the hidden curriculum is to replace and fill the gap created by the cognitive and formalized curriculum. By this, the hidden curriculum replaces the missing link in students' learning that bring a complete balance in their development. These assertions of the teachers concur with Zuhail (2012) studies which established that social developments of students are important as well as their cognitive development and the place of social developments is the place given to a second curriculum that includes the social and cultural features of a school which is referred to as the hidden curriculum. Thus, hidden curriculum furnishes the feelings, attitudes and habits of students which is neglected by cognitive base or formalized curriculum.

Away from the issue of development of students, respondents once again unanimously posited the need to consider the place of the hidden curriculum in school based on its role of assimilation of societal values requisite for students in their society. With this, respondents exemplified that the hidden curriculum should be of great concern in the school setting because of its substitution role it plays on behalf of societal members and parents. In accordance to this stance, respondents asserted that:

*“the hidden curriculum provides mediums by which students learn certain societal values expected of them by society but unfortunately students today spend more time at schools at the expense of the societal values and traditions they are to be taught at home.... trying to remove the hidden curriculum (societal values) from a school setting will create cultural lag among students leading to the graduation of students who have no knowledge of societal values....”* (Respondent TK, November 13, 2015),

*“... the school provides the atmosphere for students to be disciplined in life and also learn essential values admonished by society since they spent 90% of their time at school.”* (Respondent TH, November 13, 2015).

The response from the respondents indicate that the hidden curriculum is of great importance in school setting because of the role it plays in inculcating moral and societal values expected to be imparted by society and parents on learners to make them responsible members in alleviating societal ills. However, with this flaw on the part of societal members and parents, schools ensure learners are taught to be responsible through the values taught them so as to be problem solvers. This, according to Hashemi, Fallahi, Aojinejad, and Samavi, (2011), responsible attitudes are accrued through learning to communicate effectively and working collaboratively with colleagues in a responsible manner. Their responsible attitude prepares them concerning the problems of life and causes their personalities to be stronger so as to be effective and helpful in the society they belong to.

### **Conclusion**

The findings clearly inform that stakeholders in schools setting admit that hidden curriculum is of great concern in the school environment. As seen in the study, the hidden curriculum has the tendency of satisfying the unfinished role of the formalized curriculum by serving as supplement for students' total development. The hidden curriculum in school further acts in a shadowy manner by taking up the role of instilling in students requisite values needful for survivor in any thriving society. On the basis of what the hidden curriculum elements in school setting as perceived by teachers, the curriculum is seen not only as non-empirical but as constructs manifested in demeanors and conducts explicitly not prescribed by any formal documents. The elements close and create lasting impact or impressions on students learning outcome. Therefore, as note, students observe and emulate anything mounted by teachers since they perceive them as role models and repertoires of knowledge in the school setting. In view of this, the hidden curriculum is of relevance in school settings and for that matter stakeholders in education should give due cognizance to its presence in schools.

### **Recommendations for Policy makers**

Principals and administrators of various school should ensure that teachers conducts on how and what to dress and structure language are stipulated in teachers' conduct books so as to make teachers more informed on what they do.

Principals and Administrators should encourage and reward teachers who demonstrate in developing students holistically, that is, cognitive, affective and psychomotor.

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