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Hidden Curriculum in a Special Education Context: The Case of Individuals With Autism

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This article examines the issue of hidden curriculum as it pertains to the experiences of individuals with disabilities, primarily those diagnosed with autism disorders. Examining the assumptions regarding the hidden curriculum, this article explores the challenges these assumptions create for individuals with autism. We provide suggestions for how these challenges could be overcome through the use of specific strategies.

Introduction

The nature of our increasingly interconnected world heavily influences our work as scholars and professionals. In a heterogeneous world, methods of teaching and learning have been impacted through influencing demographics of the school-age population of students. It is not only difficult but unethical to ignore the heterogeneous and diverse nature of students in school. In response, the curriculum can no longer be designed for a homogenous population in which students have similar needs and are being trained for specific occupations. Regardless of the situation, persons must work and interact with other persons in the larger society where individuals differ in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. This latter difference makes it important to recognize the need to accommodate individuals with special needs in educational contexts to prepare them for their postschool pursuits.

According to Alsubaie (2015), the *hidden curriculum* is a term used to describe the unwritten, unofficial, unintended, and undocumented life lessons and virtues that students learn while in school. However, students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) tend to experience some challenges in understanding the aspect of social interactions within hidden curriculum. These students, despite having some special needs, also have the ability of learning, adapting, and responding to the hidden curriculum with instruction. Therefore, educators need to develop teaching strategies that address the needs of students with ASD. The strategies would provide instruction regarding aspects of the hidden curriculum, address student differences, and facilitate social integration. The hidden curriculum involves the unspoken cultural and social knowledge students acquire in the learning environment (Alsubaie, 2015). While in school, students may acquire skills such as knowing acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the society, interaction and communication skills, and how to interact with persons from different backgrounds. Skills that are often part of the hidden curriculum compliment formal learning because they reinforce and support the lessons included in the traditional curriculum.

In special education, the hidden curriculum can impact the extent to which students comprehend the lessons taught in the classroom, how they relate with other students, and how they express

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themselves (Moyse & Porter, 2015). It also helps them understand teachers' instructions and enables them to effectively work in groups. This article reviews the role of hidden curriculum in special education, especially for students diagnosed with ASD.

The concept of hidden curriculum refers to the unofficial, unintended values and unwritten processes that are used to teach students. On the other hand, the formal curriculum involves learning activities, courses and lessons in which students participate, and skills taught by educators. Thus, hidden curriculum is comprised of implicit cultural, social and academic information transferred to students during their schooling. The system is based on facts that students tend to acquire lessons, which may or may not be part of the formal coursework (Anyon, 1980).

The system is described to be important in helping students understand instructions issued by educators (Moyse & Porter, 2015). In many instances, students struggle to understand teachers' messages or hidden meanings when they not explicitly stated. Moreover, the hidden curriculum helps educators to convey messages to students about their feelings and directions that may be challenging for students to understand. Aspects of the hidden curriculum help students interpret their teachers' behaviors (Anyon, 1980). The hidden curriculum is also responsible for facilitating effective performance in groups. Group work is one mechanism for integrating social aspects into the curriculum which helps students identify the role they play in their group, encouraging effective interactions and overall positive outcomes (Bain, 2013).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

ASD is a developmental and neurological disorder that begins in early childhood and has a life-long impact. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016; see also Christensen et al., 2016), one in 68 or 1.47% of children is diagnosed with ASD in the United States, with one in 42 boys and one in 189 girls being diagnosed. ASD is characterized by persistent deficits in social communication (i.e., reciprocity, nonverbal communication, eye contact) and social interaction (i.e., developing and maintaining relationships, adopting behaviors and communication for specific contexts) as well as repetitive and restrictive patterns of behavior which can affect their ability to function both in school and at home (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Moyse & Porter, 2015). Students with ASD may experience problems putting things in order, and get easily upset by minor changes in a routine (Moyse & Porter, 2015). Some may also experience sleep problems and overly focused interest in addition to other associated health conditions. Treatment options include communication and behavior therapies, medication, and skill training (Alsubaie, 2015).

The nature of these deficits means that individuals with ASD face numerous challenges when interacting with others. For children in general, social difficulties often lead to exclusion in schools which can adversely impact their academic performance (Rubenstein, Schelling, Wilczynski, & Hooks, 2015). Specifically, for students diagnosed with ASD, difficulties in their ability to interpret/read social situations, read or attend to nonverbal cues, and view things from the perspective of others are specifically impactful in the context of learning and understanding the hidden curriculum.

Hidden Curriculum

The term *hidden curriculum* was first used to describe the differentiated training students received in schools based on their social class, and how the form of instruction perpetuated social class expectations and employment norms (Anyon, 1980). Anyon proposed the hidden curriculum was used to indoctrinate and prepare students for the type of work deemed most appropriate for their social class. In this instance, it meant the working class was trained to follow procedural steps; the middle

class was prepared to get the right answers; the professional class was engaged in independent, creative activity; and the executive class was encouraged to develop analytical skills.

More recently, the hidden curriculum has come to be defined as the norms, values, and social expectations indirectly conveyed to students which are integral to the development of social skills, in particular for students with ASD (Alsubaie, 2015; Myles & Simpson, 2001, Myles & Smith, 2005). Frequently, these skills are not taught in a learning institution or environment but assumed to be known by the students. The inclusion of students with ASD and explicit attention to the hidden curriculum helps ensure equality and justice in the education system (Moyse & Porter, 2015). This article addresses the hidden curriculum, describes its impact on kindergarten to Grade 12 students with ASD, and offers practical recommendations for helping students develop the social skills necessary to navigate in school and society.

Currently, the need for social interaction is often times largely ignored in educational settings. Most subjects in school do not touch on social interaction or societal expectations at all. While curricular designs cannot account for everything, there are normative standards, or unwritten rules that are expected to be adhered to. The hidden curriculum outlines the general standards a community holds everyone responsible for, despite the fact that most persons may not be aware of them or take them for granted. Understanding the hidden curriculum is crucial for students because it contains aspects of social behavior vital to their future success in society.

There are limits to what can be taught in school. There are many social norms and behaviors students are expected to learn and adapt to on their own. These are aspects of the hidden curriculum that support effective interactions within the societal structure. Curriculum in this context implies the unwritten motives and rules in a particular situation (McDougle, 2016). In line with the pedagogical spirit and the context of this article, the following discussion delves into the aspects of the hidden curriculum and the strategies that can be used to bring it to light by integrating it into the regular curriculum, making it tangible for students with ASD.

Strategies for Teaching Persons Diagnosed with ASD

Individuals diagnosed with autism tend to experience challenges in organizational skills. Persons with autism also tend to experience problems with conceptual thinking (Goldman, 2012). Educators should strive to be more concrete in their interactions with students. They should assist students in understanding and interpreting facial expressions (i.e., use words to accompany expressions) because persons with autism tend to experience challenges in understanding facial expressions (Moyse & Porter, 2015).

The Intersection of ASD and the Hidden Curriculum

To fully appreciate the importance of the impact of the hidden curriculum on social behavior, it is vital to recognize that students with ASD, by virtue of their condition, tend to experience challenges in process of grasping the hidden curriculum of social interactions. Central to this conversation is the concept of theory of mind (ToM), which is defined as an individual's ability to understand that everyone has their own thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and attitudes, which may differ from one's own (Goldman, 2012). Several studies have explored the ability of students with ASD to engage in or employ ToM and have found them to be lacking (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985; Peterson, 2014; Schuwerk, Vuori, & Sodian, 2015; Senju, 2012), which is not surprising, given its reliance on social interactions. Baron-Cohen, Tager-Flushbery, and Cohen (1994) proposed the connection between children's inability to interpret others' mental states and related behaviors to a deficit in ToM. Understanding this deficit can assist parents and members of society to better understand and interpret some behaviors of children with autism. Limitations in ToM helps explain impairments in

sociocommunicative behavior for individuals diagnosed with ASD (Scheeren, de Rosnay, Koot, & Begeer, 2013). For children with ASD, a lack of ToM leads to the assumption that their thoughts and feelings are similar to those of other individual's and they struggle to understand or interpret situations from another person's perspective. Moreover, a lack of ToM helps explain inappropriate reactions or emotional expressions sometimes exhibited by individuals with ASD. Finally, a deficit in ToM can help teachers understand any difficulty students might experience in identifying or understanding the motivations of characters in books or movies.

Several researchers have also found deficits in the ability of students with ASD to recognize the hidden curriculum (Lee, 2011; Myles & Smith, 2005), which causes long-term impacts (Myles & Simpson, 2001; Thomas & Boellstorff, 2017), and in response have called for the hidden curriculum to be directly addressed in the classrooms (Breakey, 2006; Endow, 2006; Horn, 2003; Moyse & Porter, 2015; Myles, 2007). Strategies to integrate the hidden curriculum in classrooms for students with developmental disabilities are appropriate, necessary, and can also benefit the greater student body and school community.

A key component when teaching students with ASD is identifying their challenges, which for many, are related to the hidden curriculum when they fail to recognize and attend to social cues and relationships in school. The hidden curriculum should be personalized and developed in a way that addresses each individual's needs (Moyse & Porter, 2015; Timms, 2011). After identifying the essentials, Browder, Thompson, Wood, and Ribuffo (2014) recommend teaching students formal curriculum items alongside one hidden curriculum item each day. The most straightforward strategy is to daily discuss how to behave and appropriate responses for specific situations. Failure to integrate individuals with ASD into the school settings in a manner that allows them to learn all aspects of the curriculum can eventually affect their academic as well as social and emotional wellbeing.

Students' confusion and resultant lack of conformity will often affect their ability to perform in the classroom when they do not feel comfortable or are ostracized by peers. Breakey (2006) argued that inappropriate social skills are easy to identify, but appropriate social skills are hard to define and vary by context and persons. Specifically, Breakey indicated,

> "social skills" are not overt rules, but are "unwritten" and covert, they are not something which we either have or don't have but are something which we can develop competence in. This challenges the view of the autistic person as 'lacking social skills' and suggests that the autistic person can improve on their competence level. (p. 156)

The idea of teaching unwritten rules can also come with a stigma, as the idea of teaching how one should act, can be perceived as taking away self-determination from individuals with disabilities. However, to take this view, one would have to ignore social norms and the important social skills have in society. To create a learning environment that is conducive for all, everyone in the school community should be aware of any social barriers that might impede student learning (Breakey, 2006).

Evidence-Based Strategies

Because individuals with ASD have difficulty recognizing unwritten social codes and expectations, the school curriculum should incorporate the teaching of vital social skills to help uncover the hidden curriculum for students with ASD and others who struggle with social interactions related to the hidden curriculum. Mazurik-Charles and Stefanou (2010) highlighted the importance of combining the teaching of aspects of the hidden curriculum, such as social skills, with the general curriculum to benefit all students. They argued that integrating features of the hidden curriculum into the

standard curriculum taught in classrooms, potentially results in students performing better. Specifically, they noted,

> social skills interventions carried out in an inclusive setting, where the hidden curriculum occurs, might have more success in producing the measurable change than interventions carried out in pull-out programs [or at home] because of the availability of typically developing peers with whom to interact, the regularity with which the intervention can occur, and the fact that skills can be taught and practiced in the environment in which they are targeted to occur (p. 163).

Recognizing the need to help students with ASD develop ToM and appropriate social interaction skills, we recommend several evidence-based practices (EBPs) found to be effective for students with ASD (see Browder et al., 2014; Howard, Ladew, & Pollack, 2009; National Autism Center, 2015a, 2015b; Wong et al, 2013). Recommendations are divided into two categories—those that address structural systems in schools (Zenko & Hite, 2014) and those that address cultural aspects of the hidden curriculum. Structural aspects include such things as providing relevant supports, resources, and school schedules. Cultural aspects of the hidden curriculum address social interaction within the school environment (Browder et al., 2014; Timms, 2011). Specific EBPs and recommendations are described in the following sections.

Structural Practices

Wong et al. (2013) identified two EBPs effective for the development of social skills, communication skills, and behavior for the student of all ages (0–22 years) diagnosed with ASD. The two skills are antecedent-based interventions and reinforcement. An *antecedent-based intervention* is defined as the "arrangement of events or circumstances that precede the occurrence of an interfering behavior and designed to lead to the reduction of the behavior" (p. 20) and *reinforcement* is defined as an "event, activity or other circumstance occurring after a learner engages in the desired behavior that leads to the increased occurrence of the behavior in the future" (p. 21).

Additional EBPs that address the development of social skills for students ages 0–22 years include modeling, peer-mediated instruction and intervention, scripting (verbal/written description of a skill or situation that is repeatedly practiced prior to the situation), social skills training, technology-aided instruction and intervention, video modeling, and visual support to develop social skills for students at all age ranges (Wong et al., 2013). When used in the classroom, video modeling produces a visual reality that enables students to visualize the actual behavior and learn how to respond appropriately in specific situations (Ogilvie, 2011). Video models can be modified to suit different circumstances that might be encountered in the classroom or community. Having students watch these videos repeatedly helps reinforce the desired learning outcomes.

Ogilvie (2011) suggested that peer mentoring pairs well with video modeling. Supported by a social constructivist approach, persons learn best when they learn with peers. Students with ASD can practice social skills with their peers and be provided with feedback on these skills (McDougle, 2016). Feedback is of vital importance to help students gauge the effectiveness of the strategy they are using. It also increases chances for improvement in social engagement and supports a greater impact for the intervention.

To specifically address communication skills, Wong and colleagues (2013) report several EBPs for students of all ages (0–22 years) diagnosed with ASD. These practices include functional communication training, modeling, scripting, technology-aided instruction and intervention, and time delay in which there is a brief delay between the opportunity to use a skill and an external prompt to initiate an appropriate response (p. 22). In the case of nonverbal communications, it is particularly important that the hidden curriculum is illuminated via video models and peer-

mediated instruction (Thomas & Boellstorff, 2017). Prompting and social narrations of storytelling also help teach the hidden curriculum to students with ASD (Endow, 2010). When students have difficulty conceptualizing verbal directions, nonverbal cues expressed in storytelling help uncover the intended message in the hidden curriculum.

Finally, in the area of behavior, Wong et al. (2013) encouraged the use of several EBPs for any student aged 0–22 years. First, they recommend differential reinforcement of alternative, incompatible, or other behavior. In the use of this EBP, students are provided with positive or desirable consequences "for behaviors or their absence that reduce the occurrence of an undesirable behavior" (p. 20). Other EBPs include extinction, defined as "the withdrawal or removal of reinforcers of interfering behavior to reduce the occurrence of that behavior" (p. 20); functional behavior assessments, consisting of a systematic collection of data designed to determine the function of an observed behavior; functional communication training; response interruption/redirection, in which a prompt, comment, or other distractor is used to redirect the learner; and social narratives. Social narratives incorporate peer modeling by providing individuals with ASD enjoyment and emotional reciprocity (Browder et al., 2010). Directly interacting with others bonds the students, making it easier for them to learn the lessons of the hidden curriculum necessary for their social integration and success.

Cultural Practices

Because the hidden curriculum is contextually and culturally specific, aspects of it can vary across settings and communities. Lee (2011) outlined cultural differences between persons of different cultures and traditions, describing how certain responses are common in one community may be considered rude in another. Similarly, students with ASD will often have difficulty displaying a socially acceptable response in certain situations. Educators can support all students by identifying key social expectations that are part of the hidden curriculum in their schools and local communities and work to build student awareness of these unwritten expectations and norms. Although not identified as EBPs, the next section outlines strategies supported by research that are useful for targeted students in need, as well as the entire classroom community.

Mitchell, Snyder, and Ware (2014) addressed schools that ignore students' needs and highlight weaknesses or deficits. To create a more open and welcoming environment, they suggest "re-valuing human differences as something other than embodiments that should be disguised, diminished or hidden away as unwanted accessories" (p. 310) while simultaneously teaching the hidden curriculum necessary for students to communicate with peers and adults. Further, they recommended, "the creation of non-normative pedagogies and classrooms [that] leaves nobody behind . . . instead, a true curricular epistemology plays to the entire room and promises to widen the arena of the embodiment for all" (p. 310).

For students with more intensive needs, one solution might be to assign a paraprofessional, volunteer, or peer partner to help students navigate difficult social situations. According to Mazurik-Charles and Stefanou (2010), such a strategy can be used in inclusive teaching settings, allowing students to remain with their peers, giving them more opportunities for interaction and to observe positive social behaviors.

Finally, additional strategies that support social development of students of different abilities include mobile learning which uses modern technology to help supplement traditional learning structures with an aim to also positively impact academic performance (Cumming, 2013; Lozic, 2014), differentiating instruction (Tomlinson, 2014), coteaching (Cook & Friend, 1995), classwide peer tutoring (Greenwood, 1997), cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1987), and other forms of peer-mediated instruction (McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2006).

Whether interventions are provided directly or, as we recommend, embedded in the traditional curriculum, creating awareness and understanding of the hidden curriculum provides benefits to students who are aware of these unwritten rules. Peers can help serve as cultural arbiters or guides for students who struggle with awareness and understanding of the unwritten rules, as well as the subtle nuances of behavior in specific social settings. Working together benefits everyone involved in creating a more supportive and accepting learning environment.

Conclusion

The importance of directly addressing and teaching the hidden curriculum in classrooms cannot be understated as it provides tools and an understanding of social norms that are critical to success in society. Inclusive classrooms should integrate concepts of the hidden curriculum into the learning process for all students. To ignore the hidden curriculum favors children who already have an advantage in society, such as students who do not experience difficulties with executive functioning and ToM, as well as those with active and engaged parents/guardians/caregivers who are able to provide the supports and scaffolding for student success. By developing an awareness of the hidden curriculum and incorporating it into classroom activities is particularly important for students with different abilities and special needs such as those diagnosed with ASD.

When designing interventions that help to illuminate the hidden curriculum, it is important to differentiate between telling students how to act, versus making them aware of social courtesies, constructs, cues, and changes to routines to assist them so they can more successfully engage with their peers, the academic curriculum, and the broader community. Actively involving students with disabilities both academically and socially, not only supports their development, it helps everyone in the classroom and school community to develop acceptance and become better prepared to work and live with a wide range of individuals. A classroom that practices acceptance and inclusion of all creates a far superior learning environment for everyone involved while preparing all students for a better future.

Finally, combining aspects of the hidden curriculum with the standard curriculum is far easier than many teachers would expect. EBPs and other promising practices are just a few ways students can be supported in addressing aspects of the hidden curriculum in the classroom. These strategies require minimal changes to the curriculum; however, exposing the hidden curriculum in such an integrated way will provide tremendous benefits to those in need.

The purpose of providing individuals with ASD with the proper tools to succeed is part of what Jordan (2005) described as an "autism-friendly environment" (p. 104). Jordan posits that by creating such environments, schools become flexible and responsive to students' needs, and move away from the expectation that students should be the ones that take the initiative to fit in. By addressing the hidden curriculum and supporting the development of ToM for students with ASD, schools provide students with the necessary skills they need to succeed in their education and their postschool endeavors. Students with special needs may not be familiar with the hidden curriculum, but they do have the capacity to learn and adapt to it when provided with the necessary instruction and support.

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