The Unseen Curriculum—
How It Affects Children

"It is when we are struggling to use our adult subject matters and values as aids in integrating children's standards on ever higher levels that we are dealing with the unseen curriculum."

Leadership in curriculum development is beset by a peculiar urgency. Our very survival in an age of mechanism, thermonuclear weapons and irreconcilable ideologies seems to depend upon the speed with which we are able to prepare our minds for the kind of existence implied in scientific advance. The lag in mass understanding seems to be alarmingly great. The situation suggests that in our schools there should be vastly greater attention to the selection and teaching of critically important subject matters and a more forthright acknowledgment that a chief duty of teachers is to transmit to immature minds the facts and understandings needed to cope with a difficult world. Moreover, the near-helplessness which school people must surely feel today because of overcrowding is only aggravated by the pleas of industrial leaders for greater effectiveness in providing the foundational preparation needed for responsible vocational participation. The apparent current decline in high school enrollments in science and mathematics in the face of our greater need and also in view of the reported increase in students' selection of these subjects in Russia, has brought sudden realization of the gravity of our situation. Little wonder that teachers find themselves somewhat embarrassed at having industry extend gratuitously a helping hand in order to insure functional relevance in what is taught.

But curriculum development is not only beset by the urgency of outside claims and pressures. Our increased understanding of children and youth calls just as urgently in another direction. The more we know about children the clearer becomes our understanding that we must provide them with opportunity for active participation in the development of what is taught. And this challenge leads us straight to an experience-centered curriculum. To some this has meant turning things over to children—sheer improvisation and ultimate failure to teach what is most needed at a time when life's requirements are too compelling to admit of the ineffectiveness of the "child-centered" school. To some it has meant a choice between the efficient teaching of predetermined bodies of material and allowing children in their undiscriminating immaturity to find out for themselves with a minimum of direction and only a mod-
erate amount of guidance. In any case such student participation could mean that particular, chosen facts might at a given time receive less emphasis than other facts not previously acknowledged as a part of the curriculum.

**Emotional Factors**

It is in efforts to resolve the apparent conflict of emphasis implied in these two general positions that attention is currently drawn to certain “hidden” factors. It is believed that these hidden elements shape powerfully the results of teaching. Moreover, it seems certain that an “unseen” curriculum is present in every program, although its quality may vary considerably. It is there whether we do anything about it or not. But if we use it deliberately and manage it carefully, it may become not only a way of harmonizing current conflicts of view, but also a means of enriching and giving direction to any program. And even where no concerted effort is made to resolve major differences, certain unseen subject matters tend to force themselves into the foreground.¹

¹ The following statement by an Aldine High School teacher is appropriate here:

>“Many teachers today are keenly aware of the gaps in their own training and experience relating to the requirements of our adult world. Some meet this situation by shutting off class discussion of topics on which they are not informed and by sticking to a highly organized pattern that has survived from past experience, whereas others can face their shortages with a different attitude. They say to themselves and to their children, ‘Let’s find out together,’ or they may even go further and say, ‘You tell me.’ Thus they acknowledge that children of today have varying contacts through which knowledge is gained. The avenues of their learning extend far and wide, even though much of such learning needs correction. Many of these contacts are not directly open to the teacher. She may seek out certain verifications of ‘what is told’ in order to give some intelligent direction to interests outside her orbit of knowledge.

>“It is in this area that one part of the unseen curriculum operates. At the moment it may seem trivial, but some teachers sense its potential and try to do something to foster it even though they are unprepared to deal directly with the materials. These teachers seem able to foster in the student a feeling of ‘I’m going to tackle that,’ whereas the teacher who avoids such potential subject matter builds an attitude of ‘I can’t do that—no one ever showed me how.’ In the one case the unseen materials rise to the surface and an enriched curriculum results, while in the other the teacher’s effort to protect herself by avoiding use of the new material may result in an abortive pupil interest and a loss to the group.”

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Pickens E. Harris is coordinator, Aldine Secondary Schools, Houston, Texas.

dertaking, whether dictated or self-chosen, becomes our objective.

**Intellectual Content**

When what is done from day to day is chosen cooperatively through teacher-pupil planning, the chances are no doubt far greater that the various aspects of total participation will develop appropriately than when what is done is authoritatively assigned. But even so, there is constant need for alertness to the hidden elements of behavior. When Johnny stares in non-attentiveness it may not be the negligence or indifference the teacher takes it to be but the continuing effect of something that happened between mother and father at breakfast. Or, it may be the lingering effect of a humiliation suffered at the hands of another teacher. Or again, it may be the pupil’s response to a growing feeling of frustration at lack of school success. The hundreds of such incipient behaviors as these—the vital affinities or mutual attractions among children, their jealousies and aversions, their discouragements and longings—the things they continually react to in the white heat of their living—all become the active concern of the teacher.

Such an observation as this may seem rather commonplace today in view of the growing mental hygiene emphasis in our schools. What is perhaps not so commonly recognized is how book materials, paper and pencil objectives, daily learning quotas and standards to be met tend to monopolize the scene so completely that only secondary attention is usually given these marginal areas of response. When we center attention too exclusively upon the child’s learning of a particular kind of material, we tend to slur over the rest of behavior or to deal with it at best as a tool. If for instance I center attention too exclusively upon a child’s learning of the meaning and use of the appositive in English, I very likely will reduce the rest of his behavior to the status of mere means or motivating device. I will of course wish to keep interest and attention alive until the mastery is complete. But I really should wish to cultivate these. I should wish to build a growing interest in good English usage, so that the pupil will not only want to learn about appositives but about other principles of construction as well. It seems certain that if I merely use the interest factor as a tool for learning, I will tend to dwarf it, perhaps destroy interest in English altogether. The same is true of the attention aspect. I should wish to sharpen attention, not merely exploit it for the teaching of something regarded as more important than it is. Perhaps the best way to dull attention is to try to get the pupil to hold it on something for the sole purpose of learning it. Our situation is a bit like driving a car. If I look too long or too exclusively at the red light ahead, I am almost certain to neglect to some extent what is going on around me, as for instance the action of the car drawing up at my left or the one coming too rapidly from the rear. I really need to watch all these factors. I need a sort of peripheral vision which will enable me to manage the full set of relationships.

In dealing with the qualitative aspects of behavior we must continually
exercise this peripheral vision. Does this child feel insecure because he is too often criticised? Then I must look for opportunities to commend him for work well done. Does the next one feel insecure because he is not fully accepted by the group? Then I must see to it that he gets recognition. Does still another worry because he lacks a feeling of success? Then I must adapt materials and procedures more carefully to his particular stage of accomplishment. If still another child has recently become a “discipline” problem, I must try to find out why. Is it because of a recently broken home? Is it because I have given him the impression that I do not approve of him? Is it because he lacks readiness for the work we are doing? How shall I deal with the child whose face from time to time reflects unhappiness? To what is he reacting? Whatever it is, it should be dealt with in part at least while we go ahead with our formal subject matters. It is futile to suppose the primary learnings can amount to much for this child unless I can unobtrusively arrange a setting that will give him a comforting lift. Thus I must forever be studying what is going on in the marginal areas of individual and group behavior to improve it. I must inevitably assume something of the attitude of the psychiatrist and mental hygienist, though I cannot hope to be as expert as either.

Today we see that practically every valuable learning is an emerging, growing thing. A child’s sense of property rights, his ability to cooperate, to take criticism, to sense problems and define them, to raise good questions, to make considered choices and decisions, to budget his time, to discriminate between the good and the less good, between the honest and dishonest, the beautiful and tawdry—all such are emerging qualities, not outright acquisitions. How many of us even now feel fully competent to make a difficult decision without revising our old patterns of thought? The same could be said of nearly every distinguishable aspect of our behavior. We need continually to reconstruct prior patterns in order to grow.

Consider any understanding that we may wish the young to acquire, as, for instance, the concept of liberty under the law. We must treat this value not as something to be learned outright, but rather as a mode of growth. We push our more mature conception back into the child’s own doings and look for its simpler manifestation in his present ways of relating himself to others. Obviously he cannot have his way all the time. He must be helped to see that others wish their way too. All of the maturity of insight that we can muster relative to the nature of freedom within our adult system of restraints is none too much to have at hand when a pupil wants his way in spite of regulations and the wishes of others. By patient management, including on rare occasion rather direct, firm dealing, we gradually build some of the voluntary restraints and meanings that prepare for the wider, institutionalized controls of society which we call liberty under the law.

Understandings and Beliefs

When we treat curriculum results as moment-to-moment improvements of behavior, we automatically raise pupil
participation to the level of dignity and importance. But to dignify behavior does not mean to indulge it or leave it where we find it. Respect for personality is not the easy thing sometimes assumed. It is certainly not a matter of allowing an individual to do as he pleases without any judgment whatever. For the moment one has before him different courses which he might take, he is confronted with the necessity of making a choice and this is not easy if action is to proceed in the light of expected consequences. Thus, to respect personality is to assume responsibility for helping individuals to improve their choices and to raise their standards.

It is this demand for remaking pupils' standards that unifies the curriculum and their behavior. And it is when we are struggling to use our adult subject matters and values as aids in integrating children's standards on ever higher levels that we are dealing with the unseen curriculum. Each of us needs vast information, mature understandings and strong beliefs which we may use as instruments in guidance, not as finalities to which children's learnings are to conform. I need them in order that guidance may have design and direction, not in order that I may indoctrinate the young or require that such materials be learned directly. Pupils will indeed deal directly with organized subject matters, but from the teacher's perspective this will be for the purpose of reconstructing their present ideas and values, not for passing courses or getting ready for examinations.

A principal difficulty today is in knowing what major understandings and beliefs to hold as our aids in guidance. Shall I hold that we in America truly believe in the integrity and worth of individuals, or do too many among us feel that they just do not count? Shall I hold that we truly believe in equality of opportunity, or were inequalities ever so great? Do we really believe in justice, or had one better employ the best lawyer he can afford? Shall I hold that a chief characteristic of Americans is their love for work, or do too many try to do as little as they can? Shall I hold that in America we believe in cooperation and pulling together, or does it require a Pearl Harbor to get us together? Shall I hold that as a people we cooperate for the public welfare, or do our campaigns for the election of public officials make us hang our heads in shame? Shall I hold that good intentions and good will toward men are enough to assure peace in the world, or must we continually build the power to keep it?

Thus the unseen curriculum has at least three major aspects: (a) the standards and emotional content of children's lives, (b) the associated intellectual content which insists itself into the foreground when effort is made to respect personality, and (c) the constellation of understandings and beliefs which we use as instruments in guidance.