

# The Silent Curriculum: Its Impact on Teaching the Basics



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*As teachers teach, a curriculum evolves—the Silent Curriculum—and all academic achievement is affected by it.*

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We read and hear a lot these days about "Back to the Basics." We read about the decline in test scores. Harold Shane, in his interview with Willard Wirtz, chairman of the blue ribbon panel on SAT score declines, noted that:

Today Americans have data to imperil their illusions and intensify their fears about pupil progress. Achievement test scores have been falling for 14 consecutive years. One might almost say that the kids are on the skids, since there has been a consistent decline in aptitude and basic skills as measured by standardized tests.<sup>1</sup>

This interview provides us with a good overview of the reported phenomenon. We are re-

minded, for instance, that there have been no test score declines in grades one through four but that the declines in scores have been greater at each successively higher grade level beginning with grade five. The interview also included a review of possible explanations of this phenomenon including: (a) less effective teaching at the higher grades and the higher the grade the more ineffective the teaching; (b) aptitude tests are not as relevant at grades 11 and 12 as they are in earlier

<sup>1</sup> Harold G. Shane. "The Academic Score Decline: Are Facts the Enemy of Truth?" *Phi Delta Kappan* October 1977, p. 83.

grades; or (c) scores simply reflect the increased percentage of school-age population remaining in school for more years.

Most of us might not be too comfortable with any of those explanations except perhaps the latter one dealing with higher retention rates causing the drop in mean or median scores. The press, along with assorted academicians, the Council for Basic Education, and others have been engaged for several years in discovering the cause of the

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drop. So far, the safest conclusion reached throughout all the rhetoric is that this is a very complex issue.

It is a matter of concern, however, and is related to what I have previously called the Silent Curriculum<sup>2</sup>—that part of the curriculum that is created *only as we teach*.

As far back as the late 1960s when serving as a consultant to the high school mathematics teachers in a large city school district in Texas, I began to get glimpses of the problem. After spending an hour on the subject of teaching mathematics, I asked the 67 teachers to break into groups of four or five and agree on the one question they would most like answered if someone *could* answer it. Of the 14 questions generated by these groups, only one of the questions reflected the fact that the teachers were mathematics teachers. But it was clear from every question that they were *teachers*. The following is a synthesis of what they most wanted to know.

- "How do you get students to want to learn?"
- "What methods and/or techniques are available to a teacher to cause a pupil to desire to do work outside the class?"
- "How do you motivate the non-interested student?"

- "How can one motivate students who are capable but lack the desire to apply concepts learned?"

All of these questions are asking: How do you motivate kids to want to learn, and what procedures do you use? Those same questions are important to all teachers of *any* subject and have no simple answers. And so I thought and worried about those questions over the years. I remembered that when I was a director of instruction in a school district in New Mexico our problem teachers (those we did not put on tenure) were problems because they lacked, in some important way, what is now called interpersonal relations skills. They simply did not relate well with colleagues, kids, or parents. In not one case was the problem a knowledge problem in the teacher's subject-matter area. The two mathematics teachers, for example, knew their mathematics, the English teacher knew English, and so forth. Still they were in deep trouble as teachers.

Then I remembered two outstanding teachers. Everyone judged them as excellent. Yet they were very different in the teaching methods they employed. They both taught toward the same goals and used the same materials, but one ran a very quiet, orderly traditional kind of room while the other room was noisy and progressive in tone. The "traditional" teacher was successful because that teacher believed that learning was important, and no one in the room was permitted to disrupt the learning of others. Learning was serious business there, and everyone was happy. The other teacher was successful because learning was the main objective of the class. Kids talked to others as long as the talk had something to do with the subject at hand. Learners were encouraged to dig out answers, discuss and argue their ideas, and not follow the "one at a time" rule for speaking out. Learning was too important to wait. Learning was equally serious business in this classroom, and everyone was happy.

Two very fine teachers, each operating in a different way.

But it is more complex than that. There were

<sup>2</sup> Philip L. Hosford. *An Instructional Theory: A Beginning*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973. 195 pp.

two other teachers in the same building who were in trouble. They were viewed with contempt by their colleagues and were hated by the kids. They taught the same age groups, used the same material as did the first two teachers, and claimed to use the same procedures. Still, one of these was judged a failure because that teacher was arrogant, dogmatic, and arbitrary. In that classroom, you sat down and shut up. It was always quiet, and no one was happy. The second of these two teachers was released because the teacher could not manage the kids. The room was always noisy, there was no discipline, the kids talked all they wanted, and no one was happy.

These last two teachers pointed to the first two very popular teachers as their models. They insisted they taught the same things in the same style and invited their supervisors to point out any differences between their teaching and that of the two favored ones.

This brings us to the Silent Curriculum.

*The real and effective differences between two such pairs of teachers are the results of their instructional interpersonal relations styles. How teachers do what they do is the heart of the Silent Curriculum. They create the Silent Curriculum as they teach.* Charles Silberman discovered this fact back in 1970 and wrote in his *Crisis in the Classroom* book:

I was wrong. What tomorrow needs is not masses of intellectuals, but masses of educated men—men educated to feel and to act as well as to think. . . . What educators must realize, moreover, is that how they teach and how they act may be more important than what they teach.<sup>3</sup>

One fact emerges clearly regarding the Silent Curriculum. It takes only four words to announce it. *Procedures always affect outcomes.* That fact is reflected by current critics from two viewpoints:

- *The first:* "While you are being nice and warm and human in the classroom, why don't you see that the kids learn the basic facts of arithmetic! You can do that without being inhumane, can't you?"

- *The second:* "What good is it if 98 percent of all the kids learn their basic facts in arithmetic if they also learn to hate school. Then later it's difficult to teach them anything because we have a motivation problem!"

Many teachers, supervisors, and principals see that the two problems are inextricably tied together. That fact is developed and emphasized in the recent Combs-Popham debate.<sup>4</sup> Although Art Combs once implied that if it comes to an either-or decision, then society can deal better with a poor reader than it can with a bigot, today, both scholars prefer to reject the either-or and go for an orchestration of skills that will yield a neither-nor.

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David Aspy and Flora Roebuck have just published the culmination of ten years of work by them and the National Consortium for Humanizing Education.<sup>5</sup> I am convinced that this book could have a profound effect on tomorrow's educational system. It deals with improving the Silent Curriculum. It shows how interpersonal relationships with kids can be taught to teachers, and how teachers can change as a result. As a matter of fact, one of the major findings is in teacher training—the closer the training is to the specific desired behavior, the greater is the probability that it will be used in the classroom. And these behaviors are facilitating behaviors—behaviors affecting the Silent Curriculum.

How does this tie in with the so-called basics? Let us look at four of their findings:

1. "There is a positive and significant relationship between teachers' levels of interpersonal

<sup>3</sup> Charles E. Silberman. *Crisis in the Classroom*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970, pp. 7 and 9.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur W. Combs, W. James Popham, and Philip L. Hosford. "Behaviorism and Humanism: A Synthesis?" *Educational Leadership* 35(1):52-63; October 1977.

<sup>5</sup> David N. Aspy and Flora N. Roebuck. *Kids Don't Learn from People They Don't Like*. Amherst, Massachusetts: Human Resource Development Press, 1977. 296 pp.

functioning and student attendance."<sup>6</sup> Translation: A good Silent Curriculum makes kids want to go to school.

2. "There is a positive and significant relationship between teachers' levels of interpersonal functioning and students' gains on achievement test scores."<sup>7</sup> Translation: A good Silent Curriculum motivates kids to learn the basics. (This may be only a logical consequence of (1) above since it is difficult to teach kids anything if they do not come to school.)

3. "There is a positive and significant relationship between teachers' levels of interpersonal functioning and enhanced student self-concept."<sup>8</sup> Translation: A good Silent Curriculum makes kids feel good about themselves.

If we wish to improve the Silent Curriculum in all the classes in our schools or in our school districts, what can we do? Here is another finding from the Aspy-Roebuck comprehensive study:

4. "There is a positive and significant relationship between the principals' levels of interpersonal functioning and the tendency on the part of their teachers to employ the same interpersonal skills in the classroom."<sup>9</sup> Translation: Where principals and supervisors maintain a good Silent Curriculum their staff and teachers get better results.

### Strategies for Improving the Silent Curriculum

The research, then, is clearly announcing the importance of the Silent Curriculum and its inseparable relationship with achievement in the 3 R's. So how can we go about improving it? Only five strategies are suggested here:

- Strategy 1. Apply the findings reported by Aspy and Roebuck. They form a general major strategy open to all of us.

- Strategy 2. Learn from our own colleagues. Many of our colleagues—teachers and supervisors—have developed proven strategies to help improve the Silent Curriculum in classrooms. One such strategy is called Student-Partner-Learning. Strong research evidence demonstrating the success of Student-Partner-Learning in both the cognitive and affective domains has been presented

by Smith.<sup>10</sup> Kids learn better via the Student-Partner-Learning procedure, and they like it better!

- Strategy 3. This strategy requires more discussion because it is not yet available in print. In 1976, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development funded a working group on

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research and theory. I can report some of what this group is finding.<sup>11</sup>

If our basic skills goals include:

1. Acquiring information and meaning through symbols,
2. Ability to manipulate symbols and use reasoning, and
3. Ability to express information and meaning through the use of language and mathematics,

Then, we must work *equally* hard to help students learn to:

1. Act in accordance with a basic ethical framework incorporating those values contributing to group living, such as honesty, fairness, compassion, and integrity;
2. Assume responsibility for actions and work together in groups to achieve mutual goals;

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Clarence Smith. "Partner Learning: Peer Tutoring Can Help Individualization." *Educational Leadership* 34 (5):361-63; February 1977.

<sup>11</sup> The goal statements and four points given here are paraphrased from a working paper presented to the ASCD Executive Council in October 1977.

3. Entertain new perceptions of the world and tolerate ambiguity; and

4. Use basic principles and concepts to understand natural phenomena, including making informed consumer decisions based on knowledge.

The ASCD group will say much more, but their present announcement seems to indicate that if one's goal is to increase achievement in the basics, then there are nine other goals that must be kept in mind and worked toward. The removal of any one of these goals (from the Silent Curriculum) materially affects the achievement of the basic skills goal.

• Strategy 4. Develop and maintain a personal physical fitness program. Industry is spending big money on this. They know that physically fit people produce more and better. But in teaching? In improving the Silent Curriculum? Yes, indeed. Another major finding of the Aspy and Roebuck study forcefully confirms this. "Teachers' levels of physical fitness are positively and significantly related to their ability to employ interpersonal skills in a sustained manner."<sup>12</sup> Translation: Tired teachers are afraid to let students get out of the well-trodden ruts because they might not be able to handle what might come up.

• Strategy 5. We must continually work at improving our ability to live with our students. Principals and supervisors must continually work at their abilities to live and work with teachers. As teachers we must *involve* our students more in tutoring and in other teaching roles in which they develop responsibility! This is the backbone of the Student-Partner-Learning process previously mentioned. We must involve students more in classroom management, in evaluation procedures, and in developing the rules and goals for learning, responsibility, fairness, compassion, and integrity. In short, we must make school a place to live—a part of life and directly related to the real world. Principals and supervisors must do the same for and with teachers.

Finally, I would remind you of my major premise. The Silent Curriculum is operative in all classrooms. It spells the difference between good and bad teaching. It spells the difference between effective learning and ineffective learning. It is directly related to achievement test scores. Any

determined effort to improve the test scores for the students in schools throughout this country that fails to address the Silent Curriculum is doomed to failure. In short, all academic achievement is inextricably interwoven with the Silent Curriculum.

We can no longer work at only the basics or only the human relations skills. Research demonstrates that our goal cannot be one-sided. We must work simultaneously at both.

We must not produce articulate, self-confident fools.

We must not produce inarticulate geniuses or learned social idiots. Our goal is to produce knowledgeable, articulate, self-confident citizens who happen to know a great deal of subject matter! We do that by improving the Silent Curriculum in our classrooms and our schools.

This is not a conclusion or a concern acknowledged only in our country. In 1977, I had the privilege to attend the Istanbul, Turkey, World Conference on Curriculum and Instruction. For ten days representatives from 53 nations discussed their educational problems. We found enormous differences, particularly related to finance and organizational schemes for operating schools. However, I found no disagreement with the concepts underlying the four key words of: Procedures always affect outcomes.

Procedures are the heart of the Silent Curriculum, and we have strategies available for improving those procedures.

The ultimate question now becomes: Are we willing to devote our governmental and personal resources and talents to this essential improvement process? We must—if we really want to improve "the basics." *PL*

<sup>12</sup> Aspy and Roebuck, *op. cit.*



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