Studying Hidden Curricula: developing a perspective in the light of postmodern insights

ALAN SKELTON
University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT This article provides an overview of research into the hidden curriculum. Following a consideration of functionalist, liberal and critical research studies, I focus in particular on recent insights which have arisen from postmodern thinking. In the light of postmodernism, I identify a personal perspective on how to study the hidden curriculum which moves beyond the established boundaries of discrete research paradigms.

Why study the hidden curriculum? Had it not fulfilled all of its usefulness and potential by 1978, when David Hargreaves begged the question: “From whom, one wonders, is the hidden curriculum now hidden?” (Hargreaves, 1978, p. 97). In answer to these questions, I want to argue that it may be timely to revisit the concept for two main reasons. Firstly, although the initial wave of critical research into the hidden curriculum may have achieved its primary purpose of revealing covert political interference into the curriculum, the task of enabling people to understand what motivates such interference is perhaps even more important in the current context where political control over the curriculum is explicit yet offered up as ‘common sense’. Secondly, contemporary hidden curriculum research may seek to problematise the implicit and taken-for-granted rationality of most ‘modern’ curricula and the totality and coherence of the belief systems which inform them. Do current conceptions of curricula prepare students for the millennium? Do they reflect and anticipate the challenge of living in a world which is rapidly changing and becoming ever more complex, fragmented and uncertain? In short, then, contemporary hidden curriculum study might usefully embrace old and new challenges and, in so doing, might seek to draw on the wide range of analytical frameworks that have been applied to the study of education. What follows is a review of different research perspectives on the hidden curriculum. A concise summary of initial work into the hidden curriculum is presented for those unfamiliar with the field, since this work still has much to offer.
contemporary critique. The section on postmodern perspectives is more substantial since it offers ‘new’ possibilities for hidden curriculum study.

Research Perspectives on the Hidden Curriculum

Different perspectives on the hidden curriculum have been articulated over the past 25 years. A word of warning, however, must accompany the following discussion of hidden curriculum perspectives. Whilst the clarification of distinct perspectives communicates central ideas, it must also be recognised that such clarification is ultimately a reductionist exercise which inevitably simplifies reality and conveys a picture of order and progression. It is important to state from the outset, therefore, that: a perspective contains internal differences (sub-perspectives); perspectives do overlap in some respects and are not, in every respect, distinct; perspectives do not necessarily build on from one another in time or in quality. Also what one calls a particular perspective is contestable (Hammersley, 1992) and different names have been identified for the perspectives which are presented here (see Giroux, 1983; Lynch, 1989).

The Functionalist Perspective

Initial work on the hidden curriculum focused on the problematic of how schools played their part in maintaining social order and stability. This ‘functionalist’ perspective (for example: Parsons, 1959; Dreeben, 1968; Jackson, 1968), viewed schools as vehicles through which students learn the social norms, values and skills they require to function and contribute to the existing society. As Giroux (1983, p. 48) explains:

The hidden curriculum is explored primarily through the social norms and moral beliefs tacitly transmitted through the socialization process that structure classroom social relationships.

Parsons and Dreeben are explicit functionalists in that they both recognise and support the linking role schools play in social maintenance. Dreeben (1968), for example, maintained that the social experiences of schools enable students to learn those norms and characteristics which are both necessary to and inherent within adult public life. He identifies four specific norms which are transmitted though schooling, namely: independence, achievement, universalism and specificity.

Jackson (1968) is less explicit in his functionalism and appears, at least initially, to be concerned about the school’s role in maintaining social order. He contrasts the hidden curriculum with the ‘official curriculum’ of schooling and describes how the crowded nature of the classroom requires students to cope with delays, denials of their desires and social distractions:

Here then are four unpublicised features of school life: delay, denial, interruption and social distraction. (Jackson, 1968, p. 17)
These coping requirements give rise to norms and values which each student must comply with in order to progress satisfactory through the school. In short, schooling satisfactorily teaches conformity to students rather than creativity, since the former brings the ‘reward’ of satisfactory negotiation of school life. Jackson concluded that although teaching conformity was the antithesis to official curriculum goals, it nevertheless had a function in preparing students for the real world of hierarchical power relations, which for him, were ‘facts of life’ to which all people were required to adapt. For this reason, his work has been located, ultimately, as part of the functionalist perspective (Giroux, 1983; Lynch, 1989).

Functionalist accounts have been criticised on a number of grounds. They assume, for example, an oversimplified, consensual relationship between school and society (Lynch, 1989). They also present students as over-determined, passive recipients of hidden curriculum messages (Lynch, 1989) and they do not address the potential significance of the hidden curriculum in the maintenance of class (Sharp, 1980) and sex (Stanworth, 1981) inequalities in society.

The Liberal Perspective

The liberal perspective views the hidden curriculum in a very different way to functionalists. It considers the hidden curriculum to be those taken-for-granted assumptions and practices of school life which although being created by various ‘actors’ within the school (for example, teachers and students), take on an appearance of accepted normality through their daily production and reproduction. Many liberal critiques of schooling, therefore, set out to expose those unquestioned and ‘hidden’ aspects of school life such as: school rules and codes of discipline; learning organisation (for example: streaming; mixed ability), and teacher-student relationships and interactions. They seek to make explicit the assumptions on which everyday practices come to light and describe the process of how these practices are created and maintained in classrooms.

Hargreaves (1967) and Lacey (1970) studied the streaming practices of schools as a form of learning organisation. Whilst the official view of streaming is that it provides an appropriate learning milieu for students of differing abilities, these authors both found that once streams had been created, students took on the ‘identity’ of the stream, leading to underachievement in the ‘lower’ stream classes. David Hargreaves (1978) explored the role of space and time in classrooms. He found that these implicit aspects of school life were a symbolic expression and reproducer of the power-relation between teachers and students. For example, teachers’ freedom of movement, central positioning, greater work space and control over the structuring, allocation and control of time within the classroom were evident, conveying messages about ‘appropriate’ teacher-student relations. Although Hargreaves suggested that some teachers do challenge dominant patterns of space and time usage, through
adopting, for example, alternative seating arrangements, he suggests that these are exceptions to the prevailing pattern found in schools.

Whilst a considerable amount of liberal scholarship focuses on exposing the assumptions behind school practices and uncovering teachers’ latent controlling devices, some studies within this perspective have shown how school practices are negotiated between teachers and between teachers and students. A number of studies, for example, have shown that teachers respond differently to school definitions of acceptable practice. Some inwardly conform, some outwardly comply and some seek to redefine school definitions (Becker, 1970; Woods, 1981; Scarth, 1987; Skelton, 1990). Woods (1979) also identifies a number of different modes of student adaptation to teachers’ attempts to exert control over the classroom which he calls: conformity; ritualism; retreatism; colonisation; intransigence and rebellion. A number of other studies have concentrated on student responses to educational experiences and have demonstrated that students ‘decode’ the official rhetoric of educational institutions and focus on what they really need to do to survive and succeed (Becker et al, 1961; Holt, 1964; Snyder, 1971).

These studies demonstrate how the liberal perspective takes a different view of people in relation to society compared with the functionalist perspective. Drawing on the philosophical roots of symbolic interactionism, humanistic psychology, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, it views people not as passive receivers of social norms and values, but as active, purposeful creators of meaning. School practices, therefore, and their hidden assumptions and effects, are not created by society and received powerless by teachers and students. Rather they are created and reproduced by teachers and students through their actions and interactions within the classroom. The emphasis in the liberal perspective, therefore, is ‘microscopic’, as opposed to ‘macroscopic’ (as with the functionalists), since its focus is internal structures and processes of schooling as opposed to the social structure and how schools contribute to the order and maintenance of this structure.

Various criticisms have been made of the liberal perspective on the hidden curriculum. It has been argued, for example, that its focus on changing school practice through the exposure of restrictive assumptions is ultimately limiting, since these assumptions and change itself are inextricably bound up in the material power base of wider society (Giroux, 1983 p. 52). A further criticism concerns its view of the relationship between people and society. It has been argued that liberals exaggerate the extent to which people exert control over their lives through purposive thought and action and underplay the controlling forces and constraints which are imposed on individual free will by society (A. Hargreaves, 1978).
The Critical Perspective

The controlling effects of social forces on students and teachers in schools are well recognised by the critical perspective. The key problematic for critical research into the hidden curriculum is to address how schooling functions to reproduce various inequalities in society. It recognises that ‘official’ or formal curriculum statements of schools support notions to those hidden or unintended consequences of schooling which lead to social injustice.

The focus of early critical research relating to the hidden curriculum concentrated on a particular form of social inequality, and sought to address the following question:

How does the process of schooling function to reproduce and sustain the relations of dominance, exploitation, and inequality between classes? (Giroux, 1983, p. 56)

Whilst there are a number of examples of class-focused, critical-Marxist accounts of schooling (Dale et al, 1976; Anyon, 1979, 1981), the best known is Bowles & Gintis’s (1976) work, Schooling in Capitalist America. Although the authors do not specifically use the term hidden curriculum, they address the relationship between schooling and work through an exploration of the tacit norms of behaviour in both settings. They used a thesis of correspondence to explain the ‘structural correspondence’ that exists between the social relations of school life and the social relations of capitalist production. They argue that the social relations of schooling reproduces the consciousness necessary for work relations, for example: the hierarchical division of labour between teachers and students; the alienated character of student’s work itself; and the division between students created by ranking and evaluation (the assessment system). In addition, different levels of schooling, “feed workers into different levels within the occupational structure” (ibid., p. 132). The work of Bowles & Gintis has attracted a lot of attention and has been criticised on a number of counts. Like work within the functionalist perspective, it has been criticised for the highly mechanistic and deterministic relationship it assumes between the economy and the school system. It also presents students, teachers and schools as passive receivers of social norms, practices and values rather than active creators of meaning (Lynch, 1989).

In the light of such criticisms, some critical researchers developed more subtle accounts of social reproduction. These accounts sought to demonstrate how schools recreated the forms of consciousness necessary for social control to be maintained without dominant groups having to use explicit mechanisms of domination. A number of these accounts moved away from positing a direct structural correspondence between schools and the economy and considered how cultural factors may play their part in reproducing social relations. Bourdieu & Passeron (1977), for example, maintain that teaching and learning in schools is undertaken within a
particular ‘habitus’: that is, a particular system of thought, perception, appreciation and action, which reflects the material and symbolic interests of the dominant groups or classes within society. Working-class habitus, they argue, does not carry the same status or ‘cultural capital’ as middle-class habitus.

Young (1971) and Keddie (1971) also maintain that the way knowledge is selected, organised and assessed in schools is arbitrary and reflects the interests of powerful groups in society. Young (1971), for example, questions the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of school knowledge. He looks at what assumptions lie behind decisions to include some curriculum subjects and not others for students to experience. He also asks why some subjects have more status than others and why knowledge is organised into discrete subjects rather than integrated in the service of a contemporary theme. Keddie (1971) critically examines the types of knowledge students have access to in schools. She argues that teachers’ perceptions of students affect the type of knowledge that is presented. For example, working-class students are offered a simple, common-sense treatment of subject matter and are encouraged to adhere to presented facts. Middle-class students, on the other hand, receive a more complex and abstract treatment of knowledge and are encouraged to question prevailing viewpoints. In this way, Keddie concludes that working-class students are denied access to higher status academic knowledge which inevitably restricts their future educational success.

The limitations of deterministic critical accounts also encouraged some researchers to explore whether social actors (such as students) might resist social forces they experience in schools. Willis (1977), for example, shows that it is not just the powerful determinism of schools that reproduce the class relations necessary for capitalism. He shows that students resistance, in the form of a group of working-class ‘lads’ anti-school behaviour, gives them a sense of power, yet leads, ultimately, to their oppression and control since they end up wanting and getting low paid manual jobs. The ‘lads’ define themselves as superior to teachers, students who are ‘bright’ (the ‘eareoles’), girls, and students from other cultures. In reproducing their own ‘shop-floor’ version of masculinity, however, they ultimately confine themselves to their own class position.

Giroux (1983) also considers the possibility that students may resist controlling forces in schools. He questions whether all acts of student non-conformity to such forces can be correctly viewed as resistance, however, and seeks to distinguish resistance from rebelliousness or deviance. He also recognises that some students are able to ‘penetrate’ and understand the lies and promises of the school (for example, in relation to notions of equality), but decide not to do anything about this. He also points out that resistance is usually described as a male working-class response to schooling and other forms of resistance – from females or from ethnic minority groups – are ignored.

These particular accounts of the reproductive process – which emphasise the possibility that students may offer some resistance to the
dominant norms and values of schools – have been subjected to a number of criticisms. The work of Willis, for example, has been criticised for its very small and particular sample and for related difficulties concerning the generalisability of findings (Lynch, 1989). Other accounts have been criticised for their idealism, with Hargreaves (1982) claiming that notions of resistance only reflect the concern of the academic left for the implications of their own (pessimistic) writing. Many of the empirical studies of resistance also focus on class relations and ignore issues of gender and race (Lynch, 1989).

Some feminist research studies have used reproduction and resistance theories to focus specifically on women’s experience in and through schooling. They have demonstrated that although schools claim to support educational equality, the norms, values, expectations and practices of schools reinforce gender stereotypes and constitute a hidden curriculum. The sexist nature of this curriculum reproduces patriarchal relations in society (McRobbie, 1978; McDonald, 1980; Spender & Spender, 1980; Stanworth, 1981). Compared with feminist contributions, there have been relatively few studies of how dominant forms of masculinity are reproduced through educational processes in or beyond schooling. The work of Connell (1989), however, is a notable exception, for he shows how the implicit dualism inherent in schooling – the academic/physical divide – creates and sustains a hierarchy of masculinities. Skelton (1993) also demonstrates how the teacher training institution serves to reproduce dominant forms of masculinity in society and restrict educational practice.

Research studies which have focused specifically on ‘race’ issues in education have been tended to be descriptive rather than explanatory (Gabe, 1991). They have considered aspects such as the relationship between black children’s experience and their self-esteem (Verma & Bagley, 1979; Stone, 1981) and academic achievement (Driver, 1980; Gilborn, 1988; Mac an Ghaill, 1988). There have been relatively few critical accounts of ‘race’ education which have explored the connections between the hidden characteristics of schooling and the racist nature of society. Notable exceptions are the work of Mullard (1982) and Brandt (1986) who both argue that all school practices relating to race – irrespective of whether these reflect an assimilationist, integrationist or cultural pluralist stance – seek to achieve the same underlying social and political imperative: namely, the maintenance and reproduction of white institutions, values and beliefs. Specific educationalist policies and practices reflect this broader aim. The policy of ‘bussing’ black students to schools which had less than 30% black intake in the mid-1960s, for example, can be seen as a way of protecting the indigenous white population and its culture (Race Today, 1975; Mullard, 1982). The rise in the number of Education Guidance centres and disruptive units and the surge in police involvement in schools can also be linked to the control of rebellious black youths (Dhondy, 1978; Webber, 1983). Finally, the recent emphasis on ‘mother tongue’ language provision in schools has been
described as coercive, in preparing migrant workers and their children for repatriation once they have served their economic purpose (Brook, 1980).

Gender and race research into education has added an important increment to hidden curriculum scholarship. A promising body of work has also sought to explain social reproduction in and through education in terms of class, gender and race interacting together (Willis, 1981; Apple, 1982, 1986). In the light of their contributions, the hidden curriculum of schooling can be brought to light as a middle-class, male, and white-dominated phenomenon, which consequently leads to inequality and injustice in society. The limitation of these accounts, like class-based analyses of the hidden curriculum specifically, relates to the extent of their determinism. Some critical researchers have attempted to overcome this limitation by stressing how social relations, norms and values are not only contested by students, but mediated by contexts which are socially, culturally and historically located. Apple (1982, 1986), for example, moves away from the deterministic reproduction tendency apparent in his earlier work to accept that schools are ‘producers’ as well as ‘distributors’ of culture. Cornbleth (1990), in positing a view of curriculum as contextualised social process, considers how contradiction, contestation and mediation may lead to different versions of the hidden curriculum being realised in different settings. She states (p. 52):

Underlying the conception of mediation is the assumption that people, including students, are active participants in the creation and interpretation of their social environments and action. But students are not independent agents; they are shaped by history and culture, and by the immediate social relations and practices of schooling.

A similar line is taken by Lynch (1989) who outlines both the universalistic (equalising) and particularistic (differentiating) characteristics of schools. Taken together, these characteristics make it difficult to support simple notions of a white, male, middle-class dominated society being uniformly transmitted to students through the hidden curriculum.

In recent years, the direct intervention of central government in educational matters has intensified critical educators’ critique of the hidden curriculum of schooling. This critique has sought to both expose and contest the underlying assumptions and values which underpin the national curriculum and its process of implementation, which has been justified by its proponents through a ‘common-sense’ appeal to ‘raise standards’. The changes which have been imposed on the educational system have been attributed to a ‘New Orthodoxy’ (Jordan, 1989) or a ‘New Right’ political ideology (Quicke, 1988) which places efficiency and value for money above notions like equality and opportunity (Ball, 1990a). Carr & Hartnett (1996) maintain that the New Right’s restructuring of education sought to replace the values of social democracy with those of a competitive, marketplace ideology. This ideology primarily views education in terms of its economic function; that is, its role in “training an
efficient workforce, creating a culture of entrepreneurship and enterprise, and fostering a positive view of industry and wealth creation” (ibid., p. 21).

The critical critique of the hidden curriculum of contemporary schooling thus continues with some vibrancy, providing a powerful check on common sense assumptions and normative educational practice. Its explanatory authority has been strengthened by a willingness to move way from mechanistic views of social reproduction to more complex analyses of power relations. One promising seam of development involves those who have sought to combine critical theories with the work of Foucault (see Ball, 1994: Fairclough, 1989); someone to whom I now wish to turn to in the section on postmodern perspectives.

The Postmodern Perspective

In recent years postmodernist writers such as Lyotard, Baudrillard, Rorty, Jameson and Foucault have begun to exert a considerable impact on the social sciences. After a slow start (Marshall, 1990), postmodern writings have begun to be applied to the field of education and the work of Foucault, in particular, has attracted much interest (Ball, 1990b; Goodson & Dowbiggin, 1990; Pignatelli, 1993). Whilst not specifically focused on the hidden curriculum, Foucault’s writings offer considerable insights which can be applied to issues such as: the role of education in social control; student/learner resistance; the exercise of power and the relationship between power and knowledge.

Foucault’s emphasis on a social reality which is characterised by plurality, fragmentation and disequilibrium brings into question many existing conceptions of the hidden curriculum. For example, a Foucauldian perspective would seek to challenge the assumed neutrality of functionalist accounts of the hidden curriculum, which stress education’s role in socialising young people in to a consensus culture of shared values, norms and attitudes. Like liberals and those from the critical perspective, Foucault would want to ask: “How do certain values, attitudes and norms come to be identified as appropriate?” and : “Through what mechanism do people come to accept them as legitimate?” Unlike most critical researchers, however, Foucault would reject the use of totalising theories of explanation and transformation such as Marxism and feminism. He would argue that forms of power in society are multifarious and multi-located and social reproduction through the hidden curriculum, therefore, cannot be reduced to a conspiratorial group of entity such as ‘class interests’; ‘the state’; or a ‘patriarchy’.

A Foucauldian approach would also question liberal perspectives on the hidden curriculum for their emphasis on subjectivity, consciousness, meaning and agency. Such an approach would argue that individuals are not free to act, think or interpret independent of persuasive forms of discourse which people choose to inhabit, yet which ultimately control them and their ability to define themselves. The liberal emphasis on the ‘speaking’ or ‘knowing’ subject – terms which indicate the ability of
individuals to act or think independently of social norms, and to possess personal meaning – would also be regarded as limited, since it would be argued that people cannot be reduced to a fixed identity, position or set of behaviours due to their complexity (people are ‘de-centred’; ‘multi-vocal’). Given this position, one might argue that there appears to be little that the hidden curriculum can actually be, devoid of explanatory power (hidden meaning relating to effects on the social structure) or subjective construction (hidden meaning residing in the individual). As Skeggs (1991) states of postmodernists generally:

The world, according to postmodernists, is opaque; it is all lived on the surface. There is nothing that hides behind its surface appearances. It is not a case of people saying what they mean – rather they don’t mean anything – for there is no meaning to be had; we are all just living simulcras, so it doesn’t matter. (Ibid., p. 259)

Fortunately for the purpose of this article, the story does not stop there and Foucault does provide, in his explicit references to school as ‘disciplinary institutions’ which produce ‘power-knowledge’ (Foucault, 1979, 1981), insights which enable the hidden curriculum to be conceptualised as a silkily subtle, complex and highly individualised source of power.

In Discipline and Punish (Foucault, 1979), for example, he contrasts the brutal power of the sovereign state (as demonstrated by public execution) with the more subtle forms of disciplinary power exercised in modern societies. Schools, together with other institutions such as hospitals, the work place and the military shape people’s abilities, behaviour, attitudes and knowledge about themselves to the extent that this knowledge come to be thought of as ‘true’. Schools, as one type of disciplinary institution, organise physical space and time with activities which are designed to change people’s behaviour along designated lines. Appropriate behaviour is reinforced by techniques of surveillance, such as testing, observing and documenting aspects of students’ personal dispositions and feelings (see Hargreaves, 1989). Subjected to such scrutiny, students become objectified, and often accept institutional definitions of themselves which enable them, subsequently, to be politically dominated as docile beings. Schools legitimate themselves through using power in this way to define individuals. The expert knowledge they gain in this process is used to legitimate further exercises of power which Foucault calls ‘power-knowledge’ (Foucault, 1981).

For Foucault, then, the hidden curriculum of schooling would refer to those disciplinary practices that reduce individuals to docility. He does not locate these practices, however, within conspiratorial group interests or the linear historical process of class or gender struggle. Rather he sees power as being circulated through discourse so there is always the possibility that individuals can resist institutional forces (Foucault, 1988). Research into the hidden curriculum for Foucault would involve
conducted an ‘archaeology’ (Foucault, 1972) of the unwritten struggles of oppressed groups. Unbridled by ideology, he would seek to explore what forms of regularity, relations, continuities and totalities really do exist in schools. Whilst his writing never explicitly references what might be termed a ‘Foucauldian politics’, there is a suggestion in his later works that information so collected might assist local groups of people to struggle for greater control or freedom over their lives in particular contexts (see Best & Kellner, 1991; Pignatelli, 1993; Wain, 1995, for a discussion of the implications of Foucault’s later work for the projects of action and resistance). A Foucauldian approach to hidden curriculum study might seek, therefore, to provide situated accounts of student oppression which could be used to inform ‘micro’ contestations to domination in particular settings.

Very little work has been undertaken which applies postmodern ideas to curriculum theory. It might be anticipated that an attention to the disequilibrium inherent in social reality might encourage those interested in the hidden curriculum to rethink and revise their understanding of linear schemes of educational development and effect. In the past, hidden curriculum writers have tended to either ignore the process of covert learning or assume its linearity. Post-modernist hidden curriculum writing, therefore, might alert readers to the ‘moments’ of student learning, unlearning and re-learning of ideas, values, norms and beliefs.

In a paper entitled, ‘Foundations for a postmodern curriculum’, Doll (1989) suggests that contemporary schooling in the modernist age teaches students implicitly that learning takes place in a linear, sequential fashion and that it can be both understood and maximised by the application of quasi-scientific, rationalistic principles. Doll compares this to a postmodern curriculum in which uncertainty, spontaneity and provisionality would all be valued for their ability to promote learning. Such a curriculum would necessarily be open, therefore, to local definition, unfolding to the internality of the learning experience and to the participants themselves. The aim would be to create a state of flux in the learner through the offering of new experiences and insights; these would offer the basis for learner transformation in a genuinely open rather than predetermined fashion. The implicit purposes of a postmodern curriculum would be to encourage a respect for perspective, uncertainty and provisionality as a preparation for living in an increasingly pluralistic, fragmented and rapidly changing society.

Many criticisms have been levelled at postmodernism which can be applied equally to the work of Foucault and postmodern perspectives on the hidden curriculum. Critical theorists, especially of a Marxist persuasion, point to the lack of an adequate analysis of power in postmodern accounts. The postmodern view that power is pluralistic and can be used by anybody, at any time and in any place, takes no account of increasing state intervention in the educational system in the late 1980s (Callinicos, 1989). Many feminists have been suspicious of postmodern writing, seeing it as a way in which disenchanted male academics can...
reassert themselves by presenting old ideas in new forms (Polan, 1988). Finally, the purpose of postmodernism has been questioned by critical theorists who can see no ultimate objective in postmodern accounts. Apart from a playful deconstruction and emphasis of the aesthetic mode of presentation (Featherstone, 1988), it has been argued that most postmodern accounts are ultimately vacuous, and therefore implicitly supportive of social and political inaction, complacency and unhappiness (Skeggs, 1991).

Conclusion: beyond a singular paradigmatic framework

Cornbleth (1990) writes that although her work is influenced by a number of perspectives, she is not a ‘slave’ to any one of them. In this section I want to clarify how different perspectives on the hidden curriculum have shaped my own particular perspective, but in so doing, I need to state from the outset that this perspective is not fixed, but constantly developing. Below is a definition of the hidden curriculum which I wish to use as a starting point for discussion which seeks to locate my own position:

The hidden curriculum is that set of implicit messages relating to knowledge, values, norms of behaviour and attitudes that learners experience in and through educational processes. These messages may be contradictory, non-linear and punctuational and each learner mediates the message in her/his own way.

From this definition, it will be clear that I do not see the hidden curriculum merely as the living or implicit representation of an idealised blueprint or official curriculum. Rather, the hidden curriculum is the set of mediated messages appropriated by learners from the actual teaching and learning processes they experience, which may be contradictory, non-linear and punctuational.

This definition informs a personal perspective which like both the liberal and critical perspectives, is sceptical of functionalist accounts of the hidden curriculum which emphasise the positive aspects of socialisation and the need to control non-normative, deviant behaviour. Such a view is based on a restricted notion of social consensus and ignores the plurality of values and beliefs in contemporary society. I share the concern of liberals to document the features of the hidden curriculum - to get ‘your hands dirty’ with empirical data, rather than rely on ‘armchair theorising’ to support claims being made about the phenomena. Consequently, I share an interest in documenting features of the hidden curriculum such as the rules, routines and relations of educational processes which are implicit but important to make public in order to understand that learner’s experience of schooling.

On the other hand, I share the view of critical researchers that liberal accounts of ‘micro’ processes within the learning context are limited in ignoring the ‘outside’, external social world. Following on from this, I
believe it is important to consider and document how the relationship between educational processes and society may be expressed in and through particular educational contexts. I also recognise, unlike liberal protagonists, that I entered into my study with ‘something in my head’: it would be naïve to suggest that I was a ‘neutral’ part of the research endeavour who did not possess any ideas about the subject under study or how to study it. Given these ideas I am drawn to the critical perspective yet recognise the limitations of some of its sub-perspectives. For example, I find deterministic accounts limited and feel attracted to critical approaches which consider the possibility of subjective resistance to external forces and personal, cultural and historical forms of mediation.

Critical formulations of subjectivity, however are surpassed by postmodernists. The paradox provided by Foucault – that individuals freely choose to control themselves – is a dramatic example of the postmodern rejection of liberal and critical notions of a fixed, centred or unitary subject. On these lines, I agree with the view that learners cannot be accurately presented as ‘controlled’ by the hidden curriculum of educational process or simply as ‘resistors’. I also disagree with the view that subjects possess singular and non-contradictory perspectives or responses to the hidden curriculum. In this way, postmodernism encourages a more realistic view of the inherent contradictions within the subject, which may be difficult to demonstrate in research articles! Whilst I recognise this difficulty, I believe it is important in my own work to show contradictions.

Postmodern writings are also useful in relation to ‘macro’ determinants of educational processes. Post-modernism us to consider the possibility that power resides in knowledge and discourse which can be reproduced or contested in a multiplicity of sites and not held, centrally, by ‘the state’ or a ‘conspiratorial group’ maintaining class, white and/or male interests. The significance of this for the study of the hidden curriculum is twofold: first, it demonstrates the importance of documenting the knowledge and discourse(s) which are central to educational contexts’ power. Secondly, it enables one to conceive of social change in ways not merely characterised by direct challenges to the state, white dominance or patriarchy, either singularly or in combination. Rather, social change may be seen as an altogether local affair, requiring particular strategies which may, in terms of their usefulness and appropriateness to change, be culturally and historically-bound.

In terms of a personal and particular contribution to the study of the hidden curriculum, I have sought to show how liberal, critical and postmodern perspectives have each exerted an influence. I would classify my own approach as being driven by a willingness to see beyond discrete schools of thought and to address their limitations, rather than by arbitrary eclecticism. There is a growing tradition of research work which challenges the boundaries of established perspectives of paradigms (Anderson, 1989; Harvey, 1990). For me, the benefits of such of tradition seem to be:
to keep things in process, to disrupt, to keep the system in play, to set up procedures to continuously demystify the realities we create, and to fight the tendency for our categories to congeal. (Lather, 1992, p. 12)

Correspondence

Alan Skelton, Division of Education, University of Sheffield, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield S10 2JA, United Kingdom.

References


