

## **Chapter 7: The Informal System and The "Hidden Curriculum"**

If we think about our school days, we most probably will remember the highs and lows that make up the image of school in our minds. Our feelings about schools are affected by the teacher, by the atmosphere of the classroom, by events taking place outside the school, and by our own perceptions. These are part of the informal system.

### ***The Open Systems Approach and the Informal System***

The internal system of the school has both a formal part consisting of roles and structure, and an informal aspect. Some of the topics considered under the informal system are the hidden curriculum, educational climate and effective schools and power dynamics in schools. The informal system includes those aspects of the educational system that are created through interactions among and within the parts in the educational systems such as teacher-students, student-student relations.

### ***The Hidden Curriculum***

Under the organized, structured curriculum lies another: rules, routines, and regulations of the hidden curriculum. These are the "implicit demands that are found in every learning institution and which students have to find out and respond to in order to survive within it." From the systems perspective, the "hidden curriculum" is one part of the total system, and we can understand it only by understanding the context in which it exists.

### **Reproduction Theory and the Informal System**

Conflict theorists argue that the hidden curriculum has a social control function that reproduces the social class of students. They claim that working-class students learn that they are not important in the system. While the students from the elite have many privileges, working-class students are trained to be loyal, punctual workers. Differences among schools in contrasting communities can be stated as follows:

1. Working class schools: following the steps of a procedure mechanically, little decision making, choice, or explanation.
2. Middle class school: Getting the right answer is important. Some figuring, choice, and decision making.
3. Affluent professional school: creative activity carried out independently, with students asked to express and apply ideas and concepts, and think about the ideas.
4. Executive elite school: developing one's analytical intellectual powers, reasoning through problems, conceptualizing rules and applying these to solving problems.

Students from different social backgrounds are taught to be successful members of their social class.

### ***The Educational "Climate" and School Effectiveness***

Some elements of the informal system are fairly easily observed: the school's architecture, open versus closed classrooms, ability grouping, age grading, and team teaching. Others are not so easily observed. Educational, climate or value climate, and its effects on school effectiveness are of this type.

The school system must accept all types of students differing in their social classes, motivations toward educational attainment or their families' attitude toward students' educational experiences and make them fit into the school system. A school's value climate results from the combination of students' race, family background, and socioeconomic status. There are studies that state the more influential role of the home environment in educational success than the school program. Most research studies indicate that private schools provide superior education to public schools because the value climate in many private schools is more conducive to learning. However, it should be mentioned that there are also other studies concluding "socioeconomic status has no effect on high school performance independent of measured ability, on educational attainment and

occupational aspirations, and via these aspirations, on educational attainment and occupational achievement."

Self-concept refers to the way individuals view themselves in particular roles, and varies depending on each different role being considered. "Self-concept of academic ability is significantly correlated with academic performance." In order for a student to try to be successful s/he should believe that s/he can be successful.

The claim that home environment plays a more decisive role in students' school achievement than the school has been tested by other researchers. Results show that, among others, the most important variable affecting the academic value climate of school for elementary students is the sense of futility- students' feelings of hopelessness and their sense that teachers do not care about their academic achievement. Another report states that students' attainment, school social structure and school climate are highly interrelated. It is also stated that schools can make differences in students' academic achievement.

Whatever the academic norms of a school, students tend to conform. Where academic achievement is rewarded by faculty and peers, students tend to achieve better. School climate explains much of the difference in levels of school achievement; differences sometimes result from factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and home effects.

### The School Climate and Effective Schools

Each school has its own "culture" as a part of the school "climate". It consists of the values, attitudes, beliefs, norms and customs of those making up the system. But this culture also has a reciprocal effect. It affects students' self-concept, attitudes and performance, expectations of teachers in schools, and the academic norms of each school.

The definition of effective schools by Ronald Edmonds is that they are schools where working-class kids score as well as middle-class kids on skill tests. What makes a school effective is the mutual effect of formal structural variables and informal climate variables. Besides these, there are other factors: a supportive home environment for students, involvement of parents with the school, and support of students doing homework. Above all, unless the students are effective, the school cannot do much to be effective. Therefore the diversity in types of students should be considered all times.

### Classroom Climate

The dynamics of classroom behavior cannot be understood unless the importance of the environment is recognized. Students' and teachers' experiences outside the classroom affect their behaviors inside the classroom.

There are some regulations in every classroom that are imposed by the teachers. These are necessary for a proper educational climate. On the other hand, classroom climate influences student attitudes toward school and learning, teachers' support and involvement are important in motivating students for success. The type and extent of classroom interaction is related to teacher styles, which can be grouped into three types: authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire, i.e. general freedom in the classroom. The daily student-teacher interactions and interpersonal relations determine the atmosphere of the classroom.

There is a distinction made in whether a classroom is in open or in traditional manner. In open classrooms; popularity is uniformly distributed, there is an increased opportunity for students to be good at some tasks. However the friendships are not as strong as they are in a traditional classroom setting, since there are not imposed seating assignments.

One assumes that "smaller is better" in the classroom, however, there is little evidence that class size itself has a direct effect on the learning process.

### ***Power Dynamics and Roles in Informal System***

Many formal regulations are transmitted to students through informal processes. So, the schools become less bureaucratic and the rules are accepted by the students easily.

Functional theorists argue that not only achievement but also obedience and cooperation are important aspects of schooling. The students are selected according to how successful they have been socialized into the system and how well they cooperate with those in power. On the other hand,

conflict theorists see a power struggle between school staff, representing the dominant values and the adult world, and students who must be controlled and taught to be "good" persons according to those values. From the interactionist perspective, each member of the class has a distinctive perception of the world of the classroom. These perceptions become automatic reactions unless they are challenged.

Students have their own set of values and attitudes that makes the students' world different than the adults' world. This student culture can be divided into subcultures since students form peer groups according to different criteria, primarily by age. For most adolescents, their peers are a reference group which influences their dress, mannerism, speech patterns, preferences. These strong interactions within peer groups determine the strength of the group that, in turn, determines its power over its members. Peer groups serve a number of purposes for their members: young people of equal age and status in the social and educational system can express themselves freely; experiment with social interactions and friendships, while learning to get along with others; and serve as a reinforcer for norms, rules, and morality. Student actions take place in a sociocultural environment. Due to basic organizational structure of schools, students feel the necessity to form groups which is a reaction to the alienating culture of schools. Students' ways of adapting to the power structure of school culture are major aspects of the informal system. Students develop strategies related to their own needs, based on their own experiences with schooling, self-concept, peer group relations, ability grouping, and other factors. For example, students' attitudes may vary from almost complete compliance with the teacher's goals to total lack of commitment. Besides these, a student may be indifferent toward those goals or may replace them by his/her own goals.

On the other hand, as opposed to student strategies, teachers have their own strategies to cope with students within the informal system in schools. They may be tough, fraternal, kindly etc depending on the circumstances. These techniques help teachers to fulfill their goals in classrooms.

Most of the teachers make decisions instinctively, based on experience. They may be situationally specific decisions or negotiative strategies depending on the conditions that arise. Teachers' strategies, especially those of new teachers, are often based on an ideal world. However, students may deviate from those ideal models and teachers, most probably, would adapt to existing conditions.

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