

Justin Carney

Unequal Educations

Dr. Daphne John

**Sit, Stay, Speak: Patriotism, Assimilation,
and the Hidden Curriculum Within American Education**

In the United States, education systems are an unavoidable part of children's developmental journey. In these systems, children are expected to learn the basic functional skills of living in a dynamic working society. While much of children's time in schooling will be spent focused on different practices of these core skills, these institutions also serve a more nuanced and hidden purpose. The idea of a "hidden curriculum" in the United States education system refers to the lessons students learn in school that are not directly written into the official curriculum. Alongside math, reading, and writing, schools also teach values, behaviors, and social expectations. These lessons are typically subtle or unspoken, especially in middle and high school as learning goals become more specified and advanced. Considering the historical forced displacement and assimilation of people of non-European descent, particularly Black, Indigenous, and immigrant groups, many scholars argue that hidden curriculum is inherently linked to colonization.

Dwayne Small defines hidden curriculum through two different practice-oriented dimensions: the formal and the unspoken. Formally, schools in wealthier communities tend to focus on skills that lead to social power and leadership, while schools in lower-income communities are more likely to emphasize manual labor, clerical skills, and standardized testing (Small, 2020. pg. 16-17). This creates significantly different educational experiences depending

on class and race. For example, wealthier schools may have the means to offer more non-standard programs that encourage creativity and expression. They are more likely to be fully equipped with musical instruments and art supplies, have smaller class sizes with adequate staffing support, and other opportunities for individualized and specialized learning. Here lies the hidden curriculum: in addition to academic content, students are learning what kind of role society expects them to have and who they are expected to take orders from.

Small also explains how the hidden curriculum is also unspoken, burdening both students and their decision-making guardians. Biased or hyperbolic language describing majority-minority schools as “underperforming” can be harmful to students’ self-esteem and academic confidence. These reductive and inaccurate stereotypes direct undue blame toward marginalized communities for systemic inequities that emerged from segregation, redlining, and other settler-colonial cultural policy. As a result, parents may feel pressured to send their children to wealthier, majority-white schools in order to access better resources, even though these environments can foster racism and isolation. These ideas were developed through the religious foundations of the United States’ early years. Early American education was strongly influenced by Puritan Protestantism and the belief that people could be morally and spiritually improved through proper teaching (Rury, 2025, Ch. 2 & 3). Reading the Bible was seen as a civic and spiritual duty, and schools served as instruments of “moral improvement” within the frameworks of patriotic religiosity. European settlers in the Americas heavily imposed the belief that peoples of non-European origin could be morally improved through religious education upon Native Americans. Schools designed for forced religious conversion became “fragile institutions of the colonial world,” hiding sites of violent assimilation and ethnic cleaning. Children were forced to adopt European, Christian values and pressured to reject their own traditions and identities.

Research on the Chilocco Indian School, established in 1883 in Oklahoma, provides a tangible example of the ways in which schooling functioned as an instrument of cultural assimilation (Bess, 2013). Native American boarding schools combined vocational training, harsh coercive discipline, and traumatic cultural erasure in order to teach Eurocentric societal norms while suppressing the vast network of Indigenous language, spiritual practice, foodways, and familial or ancestral connection that spanned the region. Chilocco's racist curricular and extracurricular practices of intentional cultural erasure reveal the hidden curriculum's assimilationist logic, that schooling wasn't designed for the exclusive purpose of teaching literacy and trade skills, but also for training children to comply with settler colonial definitions of the "proper" American citizen. At the same time, children of these settlers attended schools that affirmed their culture and religion as exclusively correct and undeniable. Many institutions also had a tendency to make claims of a commitment to Native education while diverting resources elsewhere, revealing early patterns of spoken inclusion paired with material exclusion (Rury, 2025. Ch. 1).

The hidden curriculum has also shaped the educational experiences of Black children and immigrant communities throughout U.S. history. For Black students, schooling emerged within a system that was explicitly designed to maintain an existing racial hierarchy. They were denied access to advanced learning and subjected to curricula that framed obedience and manual labor as their appropriate social roles. These patterns continued post-emancipation as segregated schools reinforced the message that Black students were intellectually inferior and socially subordinate (Rury, 2025. Ch. 3). Immigrant children, particularly Irish, Mexican, and Asian communities, encountered similar themes of cultural sorting and disenfranchisement. While European immigrant groups eventually gained some substantial upward mobility through schooling, their early educational experiences were marked by extreme hostility, protestant

cultural dominance, and aggressive pressure to abandon their languages and traditions. Mexican and Asian immigrants faced even harsher conditions with segregated and underfunded schools, racist curricula, and widespread societal prejudices that assumed cultural and intellectual inferiority (Rury, 2025, Ch. 3).

Although the rhetoric of equal opportunity became more common in the 20th century, the structural patterns of inequality persisted (Rury, 2025, Ch. 2). Tracking, unequal funding distributions, and curriculum styles continued to sort students unfairly by their class and race. Smalls' modern day analysis shows that the formal-unspoken split remains visible in modern inequalities. Affluent districts offer advanced placement courses, arts programs, and applicational learning, while underfunded districts often prioritize basic skill proficiency and standardized test prep. Hidden curriculum thus evolved from overt assimilationist projects to more subtle mechanisms of sorting and cultural reproduction. This curriculum is "hidden" in the sense that the vast majority of its mechanisms are deeply embedded in routine practices and institutional expectations, rather than in explicitly written school rules and policies. Students internalize norms like obedience to authority and the importance of punctuality without ever being directly taught them in lesson form. Small emphasized how early educational experiences in preschool and kindergarten classrooms socialize children into classroom norms in ways that shape their academic trajectories, though these efforts are not often listed as explicit curricular goals. The curriculum is not truly invisible, however. Students in underfunded schools that don't receive the same resources as those in affluent neighborhoods are not blind to the disparity. Activists and scholars have a long history of documenting and speaking out against these patterns. The school to prison pipeline, racially motivated disciplinary policies, and the concentration of minority students in underfunded schools are well documented and publicized

phenomena. Textbook debates (which histories are included, which are omitted, and which are invented) have become public controversies as more transparent descriptions and depictions of American history have become more accessible through an expanding literature, mainstream media, social media discourse, and a shift in the average political and identity demographics of incoming teachers. In contemporary American schooling, the hidden curriculum cat is out of the bag, as it has become increasingly identifiable in the face of a widely progressive social landscape.

Today's political landscape also gives us a fascinating perspective of the establishment of identity-based hidden curriculum. As identity politics surge in both frequency of appearance and applicability to educational legislation, new sectors of hidden curriculum are being shaped with each passing day. An intentional censorship of queer and transgender representation in school settings, a suppression of women's educational empowerment, and a disassemblment of student financial aid systems have all been recently introduced under the guise of protecting children and prioritizing fairness. In these new sectors, we are also witnessing a shift in how hidden curriculum is employed by oppressive systems. While the hidden curriculum has historically functioned in tandem with majority opinions of American social hierarchy, being etched backward in punitiveness and severity as time pushes public opinion toward favoring equal rights on a broader societal scale, these new sectors of the hidden curriculum work instead to reverse established progressive norms.

While the concept of the hidden curriculum emerged from cultural policies which benefited students of some demographics and disenfranchised others, its overall consequences are universally negative in many ways. While not all of the hidden curriculum's mechanisms are inherently sinister, another generation of students learning even subtle themes of division,

prejudice, and inequity will ultimately harm everyone. Acknowledging the hidden curriculum is important for parents, educators, and students, as progress takes time and starts on the small scale of empowering the voices of the public. The freedom to call out and criticize the hidden curriculum's biases and consequences is more necessary than ever in a world of increasingly managed education systems and narrowing job markets.

Works Cited

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