The Secret Curriculum in Language Teaching

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Abstract: This paper presents the curriculum, syllabus and secret curriculum concepts analyzed within the framework of foreign language teaching in Romania. It discusses the relationship of curriculum / curricula with the textbooks and teaching methods, but there are also investigating the stereotypic roles in textbooks and some aspects of co-education.

Keywords: curriculum, foreign language teaching, stereotypic roles, co-education

INTRODUCTION

Foreign languages teaching includes not only aspects of "real interaction and / or learning processes" (Westphalen 1985), but also factors such as: teachers and learners with their linguistic and non-linguistic requirements, learning objectives, subject matter, methods and methodological decisions, aim controls and institutional conditions, factors that influence the teaching of foreign languages at a higher level.

This includes the curriculum, syllabus, especially the hidden curriculum, which will be presented shortly.

The curricula include general goals for school education, a description of educational and teaching tasks for specific learning areas and / or subjects, recommendations for the educational content (in areas of learning and / or subjects), methods of teaching concepts and time guidelines (timetable).

Within this framework, the teachers have a relative educational autonomy, as they have to plan learning activities for / with the students and make them more appropriate to the learning situations. Theoretically speaking, this means that teacher-controlled school systems grant the teachers a high degree of autonomy, but also require a high level of professionalism.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The concept of the curriculum is to be distinguished from the syllabus, namely:

• syllabus means (a concrete) learning plan, with the following elements:
  o goals and content,
  o concrete details of the teaching methods,
  o teaching and learning materials, and
  o review procedures;

• the teacher is a performer of the syllabus, which is selected by school boards and set out, therefore he is an executor of a syllabus, but not a relatively autonomous educational and professional acting individual.
The term “secret curriculum” refers to implicit learning goals and unintended learning effects in education that are not mentioned in the official curriculum and that contradict it.

The term "secret curriculum" is often referred to in English as "hidden curriculum", which allegedly was introduced by Philip W. Jackson in 1968. The choice of the word "secret" is meant to be judgmental: the secret goals are not communicated openly, but unconsciously, dealt with by the unilateral choice of content, through and mapping of social structures in textbooks (life plans, action distribution), structure of education and the behaviour of teachers.

From the point of view of scientific education, school is a social reproduction of the social relations and students are taught to work in a given social system. The school, like many institutions has a dual personality: Although it promises emancipation and enlightenment, it also leads the students to adapt to the ruling “system” or to the society based hierarchies.

To live (and survive) in the school system the students learn strategies and tactics, such as:
- How to be successful with classmates or the teacher,
- how to conceal ignorance,
- how to avoid the unpleasant work,
- how to effectively use class time perceived as neutral for secondary activities;
and so on.

According to Fromm (1986) the hidden curriculum normally acts in the "backstage", while there are nevertheless differences that betray its existence:
- a) from below (students, children of their own, socially positioned below);
- b) from the side (colleagues in their own discipline or in other disciplines, friends, literature);
- c) from above (formal curriculum, supervisors, training events).

The easiest way is to deal with the last category, which is the formal curriculum and the supervisor. As is the experience resulting from the presumption “that the managers have no idea anyway. It may be that somewhere there are classes with which you can do something. But here? I’m doing here what I think is right. And anyway: What is all the highbrow stuff?”

Things are even difficult in the case of students with a socially lower position. "Of course, that has no real insight into the facts. All too simplistic, that’s also very clear, “they are not so experienced as I am”.

Nevertheless, the questions go one (especially if it comes along up outrageously rude) to the nervous. No one can accept that what he has earned for his purpose in life, is false, or labelled useless or harmful. Especially when the claim comes from people who (still) are not competent to make such an assessment!

The most difficult thing is with the colleagues. If the other person is important with his request, his problems, his feedback, then you must face the premises, the reasoning and conclusions.

Recently it has been pointed out that consolidation can cause hidden curriculum disadvantages as a result of sex or origin, or consequences of different co-education forms.

Modern Languages are much more commonly chosen by girls than by boys as a field of study. One reason for this resides in the historical development of language teaching: the girls of higher classes should learn something, but not acquire anything “scientific”, which was considered to be unfeminine. "Languages have been in this context considered to be harmless, raised the social prestige, and had no practical use. The boys, however, were trained especially in mathematics and science subjects, while languages were considered to be of little importance. Until this day these traditions show effects in the views of teachers.
One reason for the dominance of girls in foreign languages is seen in interactions: boys receive little feedback about the lack of skills, but are often criticized, particularly critical of non-intellectual aspects such as lack of order, lack of attention or lack of motivation. Since these virtues are regarded as important to the learning of foreign languages and since girls are traditionally certified to have them, this gives little motivation to boys. In particular, the neglect of the female sex in the consideration of school books is clear. Again and again the classical division of roles is represented: women are rarely employed and are preferably presented in situations of maternal wifely activities, while boys are shown playing and experimenting more. Particularly striking is that gender-specific behaviour is reinforced in school textbooks and strengthened. Emotions are illustrated preferably as belonging to girls and women and boys are portrayed as smarter and stronger.

These categorizations have changed indeed in public life and in the general view over the last 40 years, yet are often still rooted in the subconscious role models of the behaviour of the sexes.

The hidden curriculum describes those effective, but not publicly declared aims and content, such as early teaching methods of teaching/learning - which are sometimes in stark contrast to the official curriculum. Textbooks and teaching of foreign languages seem to covert curriculum in a special close relationship to stand, if we compare the “official” curriculum with the classroom practice of language teaching.

The Romanian curriculum for foreign language education from the years 2003 and 2006 is very detailed and gives instruction principles, objectives, differently structured timetables for language 1, language 2 and language 3, then the structure of programs, general and specific skills, content, and also didactic application and Evaluation Conditions, a brief methodological guide to the teaching of grammar categories, including types of exercises and steps of the school projects and group work.

Therefore the curriculum offers of a very narrow framework in which the teacher has to adapt, first, by selecting the appropriate textbook from the list of the Education Ministry approved textbooks, then by the choice of teaching methods and course content, and not least, he should not forget that he teaches “Children and not disciplines”. In addition, the teacher must teach while bearing in mind the student’s future exams, and as a result adjust the syllabus to the actual reality of the class which leads to the hidden curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

In the reality of teaching the official guidelines, however, play only a minor role, as teaching is based more on textbooks, teaching aids on offer, and a promise in practice and by the developed consensus about what "works" and what success is.

The “hidden curriculum” includes the effects exerted by the years of schooling to the students. It includes both socially desirable behaviours, such as achievement, as well as those that relate to the officially declared objectives in conflict, e.g. rivalry. Solidarity, "cheating” and "Copy" vs. Honesty. The “secret school plan” goes back to the basic problem of the curriculum, or as Meyer (1988/1989) said:

"[...] The hidden curriculum to the silent mechanisms of exercise in the rules and rituals of the institution, is about getting used to the top and bottom, of good and bad, to ostentatious and muddling through. In other words: it is about the exercise in hierarchical thinking, performance competition and compliance with standards”.

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REFERENCES