SEEKING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN ONE HIGH SCHOOL

By

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Abstract

High schools sometimes create, or perpetuate, conditions that reduce opportunities for some students to realize success. *Hidden curriculum* is a term first used in the 1960s, and describes the notion of non-academic messaging and learning in schools, focusing particularly on messaging that creates barriers to successful high school completion for some students.

This paper reviews the concept of *hidden curriculum* as an idea that evolved with changing social times to become the descriptor for institutional characteristics or practises which, by their nature, excluded some students from high school success. The literature review identifies conditions in school structures and culture that, whether intended or unintended, exist as *hidden curriculum*. The paper then develops a case study proposal that outlines research that could be done in a high school. The proposal is hypothetical at this time, and may be, or may not be, actualized. If completed, the research would listen to student voices, and would use the student lived experiences as data to identify the school’s *hidden curriculum*, thus opening the door to positive change.
Introduction and Background

This paper is an exploration of the topic of hidden curriculum, and its possible impact on high school students completing their studies. The concept of hidden curriculum has various interpretations, and continues to evolve, but for the purpose of introducing this paper, hidden curriculum is defined as the “non-academic but educationally significant consequences of schooling” (Vallance, 1973, p. 7); the definition suffices only as a beginning to a greater concept.

At the time of this writing, I am an administrator at a high school in an urban centre in the province of Alberta. The school has many students who work hard and are intent on completing high school. The facility where I work is also a congregated setting for academically talented, and identified as gifted, students. There are very few leavers, and less, if any, students who are expelled. My greatest concern is for a handful of students each year who have participated in three years of high school. They have not met the requirements of the high school diploma, and have no plan in place to continue or complete. These students would be categorized in statistical reports as leavers, but that hardly tells their stories. Teachers, counsellors, and administrators all worry about these students through their high school careers, and try various strategies to motivate and intervene. Although my experience has been that professional educators show concern for these struggling students, within the literature there are suggestions that teachers, schools, and school systems organize in ways that send messages of exclusion to some students. Whether intended or not, the messages might have an impact on the potential of success for some students (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Dreeben, 1970; Fine, 1991; Rumberger, 2004; Wehlage, 1986). While preparing the literature review, the more I read within the

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1 Key terms will be placed in italics with a full definition in Appendix A.
2 Some students need to complete one or two courses after their third year, and they have arranged to complete those courses in summer or fall sessions. These students are of less concern, as they have a plan.
3 Such students are counted by Alberta Education as leavers even if they stayed at their school for three years. See Appendix A for additional information.
scholarly journals, the more I wondered about, and worried about, what *hidden curriculum* might be occurring in my school, and what the impact might be on students at risk of not completing. This observation became a thought that haunted me. To investigate more deeply, I first needed to better understand the concept of hidden curriculum, as it relates to Canadian and American high schools.

Following from this exploration and investigation, the purposes of this paper are three fold in its examination of how the hidden curriculum (i.e. school structures, practices, and culture) impacts high school completion, especially for *at risk* students. Each purpose aligns with a section as listed below:

1. Literature review on the concept of hidden curriculum as it relates to school structures and inequity
2. Discussion of a research methodology selection
3. Proposed research design (it is important to stress that this is currently a hypothetical proposal; it may or may not be actualized)

**Hidden Curriculum Literature Review**

The following literature review is an examination of various components of the hidden curriculum, as it was first conceived in the literature and as it has evolved over time. As the adjective hidden suggests, such a curriculum is not overt and could be interpreted as the underbelly of the more obvious mandated curriculum. The discussion of hidden curriculum touches on provocative questions of authority, power, control, inequity, and political suppression of social classes. The notion of hidden curriculum is itself often hidden in the literature.
Schooling for socialization

The established practice of using school as a socializing agent is entwined with the developments in public schooling since the 1800s. Although the history of public education is beyond the scope of this paper, education foundations scholars agree that early public schools had as their aim to instill social order by teaching certain behaviours, beliefs, and values.

Egerton Ryerson, founder of Ontario public schooling, saw state education as a way to control “alien elements” (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2011). Eminent sociologist Emile Durkheim lectured in Paris in the early 1900s that with religious authority waning, schooling was the main institution responsible to perpetuate a homogenous society by reinforcing societal norms and beliefs. He also pointed out that education is more likely to reproduce society than to change or create it (1956). More currently, noted Canadian scholar Keiran Egan asserts that “the process of socialization is central to the mandate of schools today” (1997, p. 11).

The term hidden curriculum came into use in the 1960s, through sociologists such as Philip Jackson and Robert Dreeben (Vallance, 1973). The term described the non-academic learning that is systematic but not explicit (Vallance, 1973), including the norms and beliefs of society that education had traditionally been charged with providing. Personal qualities that were encouraged in schools included courtesy, cooperation, and doing one’s best (Jackson, 1970). It is curious that those outcomes which were much of the original purpose of public schooling took on a subversive connotation through the term - hidden - given that socialization was a stated original purpose. The critical comment was moved by Dreeben (1970) toward a conspiratorial picture of institutional socialization, with students learning, in a de-humanizing process, to accept a loss of personal identity, and to accept the absolute legitimacy of school authority. The tone of the writing is reminiscent of the aura of rebellion and criticism of
authority that was the zeitgeist in Canada and the USA in the late 1960s. The academic literature from that time challenges that some school routines may not be fair to all students, and that practices are not equitable, particularly in the way schools manage the range of students’ IQs, developmental range within an individual class, and family differences (Friedenberg, 1970, Dreeben, 1970, Rosenthal, 1970). These challenges foreshadow developments in the evolving conceptualization of hidden curriculum.

**Schooling to maintain social order**

By the mid-1970s, scholars moved beyond the linking of hidden curriculum with the training of students to a critique of the educational structures that reinforced an acceptance of power. School structures began to be described as systems that intentionally supported and groomed the next generation for economic and social status quo. Critical theorists Herbert Bowles and Samuel Gintis charged that “schools prepare people for adult work roles by socializing people to function well and without complaint” (2002, p. 1). They believed that socializing students was a way to maintain the “hierarchical structure of the modern corporation” (2002, p.1). Schools would accomplish this in the way they structured interactions, and provided rewards and sanctions (2002). Bowles and Gintis wrote their book in 1976; they revisited their work in a 2002 article, with the conclusion that new and more extensive data supported the original assertion.

Paul Willis studied working class youth in a coal-mining village school in the north of England. He described the students as anti-school, and counter-culture; rather than accepting their place in the social hierarchy, they disdained school and were oppositional to teachers (1976). Although Willis saw the students as rebellious to any influence that school might have had, their careers went just as Bowles and Gintis had predicted, that working class youth grew up
to hold working class jobs. Rejecting the social structure that their school imposed on them seems to have landed the result that would have been expected had they accepted that imposition. Willis suggests that their rejection of school may have been, in fact, part of an educational plan, as their minimal academic success would make them well suited for the manual labour needed by their industrial district. Davies & Guppy (2006) report that despite significant interest in Willis’ study, North American researchers were unable to replicate the results. They theorize that Willis’ remarkable findings might have been a product of a specific geographic and cultural situation. Regardless, Willis presents a powerful example of hidden curriculum, and its impact on the youth involved.

**Battling hidden curriculum as an oppressive force**

Literature on the topic in the 1980s and 1990s moved beyond the theoretical discourse, and turned its attention toward the actual impacts of hidden curriculum on students. The literature has a tone of advocacy, is sometimes indignant and emotional, and most importantly, demands change. Michael Apple, while generally supporting Bowles and Gintis’ position, pointed out that those studying the sociology of education must consider gender and race equally with class relations, as factors in the structure of public schooling (1988). Researchers looked for specific examples of what could/should be addressed in school organization to mitigate, or remove, the hidden curriculum and its impacts. Rumberger (1987), Finn & Voelkl (1993), and Wehlage (1986) studied school-related factors that allegedly influenced student populations to disengage from, or drop out of, school.

Michelle Fine put faces and names to the issue of the hidden curriculum in her passionate writing about the impact of hidden curriculum on student populations in New York City high schools. She challenged that American “public schools have never been designed for the benefit
of low-income students of colour” (1991, xi). Public high schools serving low-income students were, in Fine’s view, “organized in ways that…lend academic and social legitimacy to prevailing ideologies and persons of privilege which often deny and betray the historic and current lived experiences of these youth” (1991, p. 199). She conceptualised dropouts as “critics of educational and labor market arrangements” (1991, p. 4), not “helpless and hopeless loser[s]” (1991, p. 4) as other authors depicted. Fine expressed concern that schools were not only organized to serve some at the expense of others, but also that schools actively censored criticism from their own students in demanding conformity.

Hidden curriculum had by this time evolved to be understood as a set of structures, practices and beliefs that existed in schools, school systems, and at the political level, which favoured certain students while disadvantaging others (Fine, 1991, Rumberger, 1987). Disadvantaged students, who proportionately more often represented racial minorities, or difficult family or personal factors, were forced by rigid school rules into educational situations for which they were not suited, and in which they would not succeed (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983; Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage, 1986). Fine reasoned that if the dropout could be portrayed as deficient in some way, “then the structures, ideologies and practices that exile them systematically are rendered invisible” (1991, p. 5). Finding and changing those structures and practices that embody the hidden curriculum would be critical to fully understanding how some students fail to succeed. Wehlage challenged researchers to move beyond demographics and statistics which could predict dropouts, and, like Fine, encouraged scholars to “discover what it is about school that produces failure and negative experiences for the at-risk” (1986, p. 20). These scholars helped to move the work toward identifying institutional characteristics and strategies that actually result in success for marginalized students.
Naming the factors

Related literature of the first decade of the 2000s makes less use of the term hidden curriculum, replacing it with the term *school-related factors*, with factors being either risk-creating or protective in nature (Alberta Education, 2009; Ferguson et al., 2005). This seems to represent a logical step forward as the research focuses on finding and fixing those school-related factors that act as barriers. These barriers have been described in various ways, and include the following: researchers have studied how faculty treat black/Hispanic students differently (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Jackson, 2011), how schools preserve the current social order (McMahon & Portelli, 2004), the trajectory of the dropout (Ferguson et al., 2005), and listening to, and learning from, the voice of the dropout (Lessard, 2007; Reilly-Clark, 2003). There is no checklist of hidden curriculum that one can apply; however, the literature does list various aspects to consider, in identifying school-based risk factors.

The hidden curriculum appears in many forms, and may be explicit or implicit, and intentional, or not (Davies & Guppy, 2006; Vallance, 1973). It can be found across schools contexts, such as student-teacher relationships, classroom structure, and school organization. It can influence school processes such as values acquisition, socialization, and maintenance/enforcement of school structures (Vallance, 1973). Norms such as manners and classroom conduct are often taught explicitly. The current rise in popularity of character education programs in schools is a return to the practice of schools as agents of socialization. Davies and Guppy (2006) discuss some examples of structures creating implicit learning. School architecture is one example - classrooms were traditionally designed for the teacher to conduct the lesson from the front, reinforcing authority and a power relationship (2006). Instructional

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4 Experts also identify family factors, community factors, and personal factors that can impact student success in school. This paper deals only with school-related factors, but that is not meant to suggest that responsibilities in these other areas do not need to be addressed. A holistic approach is certainly preferable.
resources such as textbooks and film/video media reflect the social beliefs of their time: women’s role in shaping history, Aboriginal stereotyping, and Euro-centric views of war and colonization are examples of implicit educational messages. While these are good general examples of hidden curriculum, my purpose is to investigate the hidden curriculum that discourages, or limits students’ potential success in high school.

The practice of tracking, or sorting students into ability groupings, has been addressed as a context for hidden curriculum. Dornbusch and Glasgow argue that organizing students into tracks sends differentiated messages to the different groups. They suggest that teachers may have stereotyped opinions of students in lower track groups, which in turn can impact student performance (1996). Deil-Amen and DeLuca looked at school programs and identified vocational programs as a “dumping ground for minority (mostly African-American and Hispanic) students” (2010, p. 32). They accuse school systems of perpetuating an educational underclass by providing a “structured lack of opportunities” to these students (p. 29). Wehlage argues conversely that alternative schools offering specialized programs may be just what is needed for students who are perpetually disadvantaged by the traditional school system (1986).

Wehlage (1986) identified three variables that were critical to the tone of the school and were based on the perceptions of students. Those variables were perceived teacher interest in/caring about students, effectiveness of the discipline system, and perceived fairness of the discipline system. Used poorly, these factors resulted in the school existing as an alienating institution. Current literature points to the significance of these same factors; in two studies, discipline and teacher interest were both applied in ways that disadvantaged racial minorities in

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5 Tracking can offer greater success to American students struggling with learning, but it restricts students from moving into higher levels of courses. It appears to be a more rigid practice in the U.S. Alberta’s school system allows for mobility across tracks of different level of academic challenge, thus tracking may not have the same negative impact in my school than is attributed to the practice in the U.S.
the schools being observed (Jackson, 2011; Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). Ferguson et al. (2005) identified school discipline methods, lack of counselling/outreach, and alternative education opportunities as key to risking or protecting the school experience of youth. Dewitt, Akst and Braun found that when schools focused on creating a culture of school membership, defined as a warm and caring atmosphere, strong behavioural norms, and a focus on learning and mastery (as perceived by students), greater academic success was reported by the school (2002).

The hidden curriculum plays out in day-to-day non-formal school activities in addition to classroom and administrator contact. Jackson (2011) looked for examples of the “prevailing attitudes and beliefs of the community” (p. 70) by observing at-risk students going about their regular school day in the cafeteria, in bus lineups, hallways, and through interactions with teachers. She noted that even the school yearbook demonstrated the different status given to the few black students in the mostly white, suburban high school.

It is understood that as students move through their school experience, there are many points of transition. The move from middle school to high school, and the move from high school to post-secondary or work life are transitions that are of particular interest to high schools. Alberta Education identifies successful transitions as a school-related protective factor, and encourages educators to develop related supportive strategies (2009).

**Hidden Curriculum Summary**

The term hidden curriculum has evolved over time from expected, and appropriate learning for socialization and morality that makes one wonder why it needed to be concealed, through to describing schooling that is intentionally organized to repress social classes, race, gender, or students who don’t fit academically or behaviourally. The evolution of the term is

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6 Alberta Education’s 2009 study on raising high school completion rates includes a number of practical strategies. School-based strategies are only a part of the comprehensive list.
reflective of change over time in North American society. The veiled curriculum can result in immensely powerful learning (Davies & Guppy, 2006), and includes social understandings about institutions that do not provide for some individuals (Fine, 1991). The hidden messaging may be uncovered in school curriculum, programs, resources, rules, organization, culture, and relationships.

In the past decade, hidden curriculum as a term has fallen from use; the concept, as it pertains to student success, is more often referred to as school-related factors. This shift is noteworthy; it represents acknowledgement of the role schools play in success for all students, and it allows for identification of specific characteristics that can be adjusted. Examples of these characteristics include contextual factors such as teacher-student relationships, student perception of inclusion in school life, and availability of counselling support. Structural factors include school rules and discipline, selecting appropriate programs, offering appropriate courses, and transitioning students through their school experience (Alberta Education, 2009; Gallagher, 2002; Ferguson et al., 2005; Lessard, 2007). The ways in which schools apply these characteristics truly do deliver both explicit and implicit messages to students; a student may not give up because one course was not available to him or her, but there may be a powerful cumulative effect when a student is affected, over time, by multiple lessons from the hidden curriculum of school-related factors.

Within my own school, it is the messages that students perceive regarding the hidden curriculum of school-related factors that I aim to investigate. Many scholars suggest listening to

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7 School-related factors may not address the power relationships implicit in most high schools, nor does it address the cultural capital with which students come to school. Although outside the scope of this paper, these are important discussions.

8 It is a complicated process to create a high school timetable, with complicated considerations. For example, a Science 30 course (focusing on science literacy) is a less rigorous alternative for a student who needs a grade 12 (30 level) science course, but who unexpectedly failed Chemistry or Biology in the first half of the year. The course must be offered in the second half of the year to truly support such a student, and is a small but powerful tweak in lessening the cumulative effects of the hidden curriculum.
student voice as a way to conduct research (Ferguson et al., 2005; Fine & Rosenberg, 1983; Gallagher, 2002; Witherall & Noddings, 1991). Although I am employed and a designated authority within my high school, I have a bias that is acknowledged and yet framed within my proposal as part of my phenomenological approach; listening to the student view is not only warranted, but preferable to any other way of investigating.

The following two sections focus on selecting and outlining a research methodology, and the hypothetical research proposal. This paper reflects my commitment to address a broad issue in a close-to-home manner. The literature regarding hidden curriculum and school-related factors opens other questions of interest and importance. A particularly useful question to pursue would be one that explores the hidden curriculum of the provincial ministry of education. The ministry, Alberta Education, sets school legislation, programs of study, and procedural guidelines for all schools in the province; there may well be students left outside of the education structure by the very nature of the structure. This would be a beneficial area of study, guided by the critical tenets of hidden curriculum.

**Research Methodology**

The previous hidden curriculum literature summary points to several influential factors, but especially institutional culpability. Authors specify that schools may marginalize some students through various school-related factors including the following: school curriculum, programs, resources, rules, organization, culture, and relationships with adults (Apple, 1988; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage, 1986). As described earlier in this paper, as an administrator in a high school, I am concerned about the students of my school finishing high school. As such, I am proposing a research study that addresses the following: In the perception
of students at risk of not graduating, what are the school-related factors that, individually or cumulatively, impact the students in a negative way?

Many authors concur that the literature about at-risk students is rife with quantitative reports; it is less often that researchers ask students directly about their lived experiences in schools (Lessard, 2007; Reilly-Clark, 2003). One such quantitative study, an eight year longitudinal study of over 37,000 students, reports no less than 23 factors in a student’s life that accompany high school non-completion with statistical significance (Alberta Education, 2009). Follow-up recommendations address big-picture, long-term actions. Those large-scale recommendations are not tools for immediate use, however. In addition, I could not distinctly find my school’s at-risk students in the report’s aggregated data; bits and pieces of 23 factors do not comprise the struggling students who are my focus. While I respect the merits of designing change based on large-scale quantitative data, it is a very long way from understanding my students’ experiences, and adjusting responsively.

Authors including Fine (1991), Rumberger (2004), and Gallagher (2002) speak to the importance of listening to students as a way of gathering data, and Witherell & Noddings (1991) stress that listening shows students that they are cared about. I aim to discover if there are characteristics of the school’s culture or organization that, by their short or long-term effects, deter some students from success. Through this research, those students who are currently, or have been recently, struggling could provide perceptions of their school experience, would have an opportunity to be listened to by someone who cares and has the authority to invoke changes. They would then have the opportunity to be part of changes, for themselves or for future students. Their experiences are best explored through the process of listening, and cannot be separated from the context in which they occur.
I would work from a qualitative, phenomenological perspective to explore my research question, using a case study approach. Palys urges researchers to consider, when designing research, whose interests are being served (2003). I aim to serve the struggling students of my school community; I believe that concern starts with listening to their story, their perceptions, and their feelings. The quantitative approach of many studies, including that of Alberta Education (2009), paints a broad landscape view of high school non-completion. In contrast, my proposed study would bring into clear focus the details of a few individuals living on that landscape, with a depth that comes from constructing understanding through the eyes of struggling students.

**Qualitative research model**

Qualitative, phenomenological research allows us to understand from the participant’s, rather than the researcher’s perspective, and it is inductive, which allows the researcher to build a theory based on what is observed, rather than test a pre-built hypothesis (Merriam, 2001; Palys, 2003). These features both fit the need of my central question. I have questions, but I do not have a pre-existing hypothesis; thus the perceptions of the students at risk are necessary to explore. Qualitative research is, then, the methodology best suited to my purpose.

Students receive hidden curriculum as part of their daily lived school experience. The effects of the hidden curriculum may be less separate than they are co-mingling and cumulative, as the messages are found in context as well as in process (Vallance, 1973). Because of this co-mingling, the research lens would need to discern the whole and the parts and thus a phenomenological approach would be beneficial. A phenomenological orientation:

…must take into account that humans are cognitive beings who actively perceive and make sense of the world around them, have the capacity to abstract from their experience,
ascribe meaning to their behaviour and the world around them, and are affected by those meanings (Palys, 2003, p. 9)

While hidden curriculum can be unpacked as identifiable factors, or characteristics, that can have a destructive impact on success for some students (Ferguson et al., 2005; Wehlage, 1986), it may not be reasonable to expect students to have the capacity to identify the individual elements of their school day that culminate in a lack of achievement. I would adopt a phenomenological orientation toward this research which would allow participants to reflect on their lived school world, and the meaning they made from that, to guide my own learning (Palys, 2003), and I would also use a case study approach.

**Case study approach**

Case study involves “systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how it operates or functions” (Berg, 2001, p. 225). Experts agree that defining, or putting boundaries around, the case that is to be studied is key to what differentiates case studies from other kinds of research (Berg, 2001; Merriam, 2001; Palys, 2003).

The case study approach is well suited to questions of *how*, and to cases where the variables are “so embedded in the situation as to be impossible to identify ahead of time” (Merriam, 2001, p. 32). The approach is intensive and holistic, and it works well in exploring processes (Merriam, 2001). Case studies allow examination of patterns of organizations; they have boundaries of time and place; and they involve contextual information, all as a way of explaining something about a phenomenon (Merriam, 2001; Seale, 2004).

Guba and Lincoln (1981), in Merriam (2001), caution researchers that case studies may oversimplify, or exaggerate, a situation; even so, a case study may still provide deep insight.
Hidden curriculum as school-related factors appears in the way that schools run, and are not merely an ideological position. A case study would open the door to understanding the influences of teachers, peers, school rules, and the provincial system, on a struggling student. Study data could suggest the direction to beneficial changes in school staff attitudes, practices, and policies. These changes could be an overhaul of existing practice, or they could be simple tweaks. The optimal result would be fewer students who are not on track for high school completion by the end of three years at the school. Such changes may support greater success in more than just the students who are at the centre of this study. These are significant benefits to my research question; additional, unpredicted benefits could arise if the research were activated. Case studies are a common and well accepted research method and well suited to this research context.

**Ethics and role of the researcher**

There is much in the literature to advise a researcher about issues of ethics. We are advised that the researcher has an ethical obligation to her study population (Berg, 2001), and that research relationships should be based in trust and integrity (Kelly & Ali in Seale, 2004). Confidentiality and informed consent are main areas of consideration (Berg, 2001; Kelly & Ali in Seale, 2004). Potential conflict of interest may also be an issue, particularly if there is a power differential between researcher and participant (Palys, 2003).

I would act as the sole researcher in this study. It could be sensitive to be both the researcher and an administrator in the setting. As a school administrator, I hold some degree of power and authority with students and school staff. Students may feel pressured to participate in

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9 The research, currently hypothetical, would be conducted outside of, and upon completion of, this paper and the MAIS 701 course, and as such, the proposal would not be submitted for Athabasca University ethics review. The proposal would, however, be submitted to my own school board as part of the process of applying to do research in a school.
In order to maintain a good relationship with me, or they may be uncomfortable being honest with a school administrator. Palys guides researchers to resolve ethical concerns by thinking beyond theoretical right answers, and to focus on the process of considering if the participants’ perspective has been adequately taken into account (2003). Concerns about ethics and conflict of interest in my proposed study would be addressed in this manner:

- select participants from the half of the alphabet that I am not administrator for (I have incidental, but not purposeful contact with this group; discussions of future plans, or discipline issues, would not be with me)
- use informed consent to assure that this research would be distinct from school processes. I would be acting only as a researcher, and participant responses would not impact the participant in their school life. This is intended to protect participants from feeling vulnerable either during, or after, the research process. A sample Request for Informed Consent is included as Appendix C of this paper.
- use the same informed consent to assure that this research is entirely confidential, and any results that could identify a participant would not be used in final reports. I would indicate as well that the work may help future students, through changes based on discoveries from the research.
- conduct research in a neutral location of the student’s choosing (e.g. meeting room in nearby community centre that is familiar to students as the centre’s facilities are used for physical education classes, or a coffee shop close to participant’s home, rather than close to the school)
- offer participating students the opportunity to meet with a guidance counsellor, should the interview process be upsetting to them
• make anonymous the transcripts of data. A student may choose to withdraw from the study, and the data would be eliminated from the results, up to the point that the data becomes anonymous, and combined. At that point, it becomes impossible to identify an individual student’s data, thus it could not be eliminated.

• Participating students would be invited to view the study results; this acts as closure, and should assure participants that their contributions are not traceable to them as individuals.

I have a robust understanding of school structure and rhythm which enhances my understanding of perceptions that participants would share, and would strengthen my position as researcher. Palys (2003) points out that an interviewer who has an interest in the topic and the data will inevitably produce better quality data from the interview. He notes that being close to participants serves to produce valid data in a qualitative approach to research (2003). An interviewer is first a good listener (Berg, 2001); a good point for me in my researcher role, as I would endeavour to avoid bias that may emerge, if the research were activated.

Selecting participants

My objective would be to determine if there are institutional issues at my high school that have, in the perception of students at risk of not completing, served to impact, discourage, or impede their success. My operational definition of a student at risk of not completing, for this purpose, would be taken from the internal list generated in February each year, of grade 12 (final year) students who may not, or do not, have sufficient credits, or the required courses, to meet the requirements for a Province of Alberta high school diploma. I would eliminate from this list any student who would be within 5 credits, or one required course, of completion, by June of

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10 See appendix for information about the requirements for a high school diploma in Alberta.
that school year. (There are a number of reasons, outside of institutional factors, that a student could be in this situation.) Students may be well suited as potential participants if they:

- are two or more courses, or ten or more credits, away from completion, or
- have a history prior to this school year of failed courses, or
- have failed the same course more than once, and
- are in the alpha half of students for whom I do not have administrative oversight. I have limited contact with this group through the school year, and there would be less reason for concern that I might carry a bias.

I have opted for grade 12 students for two reasons: the first reason is to satisfy the ethical concern mentioned earlier in this paper, and the second is my experience that students in their final year are typically more reflective and honest about their high school experience. They may be both more aware of their path through school, and less inhibited to speak critically. I would endeavour to have balanced gender representation.

Some students at this high school self-identify with social groups, such as the stereotypical jocks or party-ers. Other students present as quiet and withdrawn, and do not belong to an identifiable group. It would be helpful to my study to have representation from all of these social groupings, where they fit the criteria above. I would confer with my colleague administrator or school guidance counsellors for assistance in identifying students accordingly.

I anticipate that between 5 and 10 students may fit the criteria, and hopefully would agree to participate in the research. It is usual for case studies to have a smaller sample size, and Merriam (2001) assures researchers that the number of participants is less critical than getting quality information from those who do participate.
Potential participants would be recruited through an initial conversation with their guidance counsellor. Guidance counsellors have detailed knowledge of, and conversations about, student progress toward graduation. If students decline to participate, they would be assured that there would be absolutely no ramification as they complete their school year.

**Interview as method**

Social sciences research texts are instructive in when and how to use interviewing as a data collection method. Merriam (2001) suggests that interviews work well when a small number of participants are involved. According to Palys (2003), interviews help researchers understand the phenomenology, or lived experience, of participants. He and Merriam (2001) agree that interviews are the best way to gather “deep, rich data” (Palys, 2003, p. 198).

Interviews may be highly structured, with a prepared set of questions, or they may consist of a starting point only, counting on the participant to relate their story with little prompting. Between these two styles is the semi-structured interview, where question topics are predetermined, but where the interviewer has the flexibility to choose how to guide the interview, based on the responses of the participant. This format is widely considered by qualitative researchers to be an effective way to gather data, where all questions cannot be anticipated and where responses may take the form of story (Berg, 2001; Merriam, 2001; Palys, 2003).

Noddings (2006) encourages listening to students. Inherent in the semi-structured interview is a to-and-fro rhythm with the people who have knowledge, and who are being acknowledged for that. In this careful listening, participants would move to an unofficial and momentary position of co-researchers with me.

The semi-structured interview is the format I would develop for this study. Interview questions would centre on the topics of school curriculum, programs, resources, rules,
organization, culture, and relationships with adults, as components of hidden curriculum that may potentially be related to a lack of success for some students. I expect that my phenomenological orientation would encourage robust response; it is important for me to be ready to use whichever interview questions are needed, and to recognize when a topic has already been covered as part of the participant’s story.

Interview instructions, questions, and conversation should all be developed using the vocabulary of the participant (Berg, 2001; Merriam, 2001). Accordingly, I would prepare an interview guide, and I would begin with a pilot interview, adjusting the guide as needed for the actual interviews. Palys (2003) urges interviewers to put “considerable effort” at the start of the interview into ensuring that respondents understand that their responses will be confidential (p. 161).

Student participants would be those who have had limited school success, and I should anticipate that some may be sensitive, angry, accusatory, or defensive. Kelly and Ali in Seale (2004) remind researchers to be cognizant of the nature of working with vulnerable persons, but also that assuming vulnerability can be particularly disempowering to participants. The message is to respect participants’ accounts as both truthful and competent. Byrne, in Seale (2004) cautions that the interviewer may be put in a “disturbing position” if a respondent makes a statement that the interviewer finds offensive (p. 190). This could indeed happen in my research situation; I must remember to act as researcher, not administrator, should this occur.

Data collection and analysis

The literature discusses the pros and cons of methods of recording data from loosely structured interviews. Most commonly mentioned are using a tape recorder, keeping notes throughout the interview, and preparing notes as soon as the interview has ended (Berg, 2001;
Byrne, 2004). Tape recording allows this novice interviewer to focus fully on the interview, and is my preferred method. This would be specifically noted for participants as part of the process of informed consent. Additionally, it is recommended that regardless of recording method, the researcher should make reflective notes following each interview, either handwritten or electronically processed (Byrne, 2004; Merriam, 2001).

Merriam (2001) advises that data analysis in qualitative research begins simultaneously with data collection, rather than as a linear next step in the process, particularly as responses in the early part of the interview will help set direction for later discussion topics. It is frequent practice to transcribe recorded interviews; Byrne, in Seale (2004) suggests that a preliminary list of categories or themes can be developed during the transcription process. This assumes the researcher is creating the transcripts, which would be true in my case. The thorough review of the transcribed data would affirm the categories selected, or the researcher may find it necessary to make some changes. This two-step process increases the reliability and validity of the data analysis, according to Byrne (in Seale, 2004). Category names can be generated from the participants’ data, and also from the literature. Merriam (2001) provides valuable guidelines for category development, guidelines that she says can be used in all qualitative research, including case studies. She does remind researchers, though, that case studies may be more complex to categorize, given their holistic nature. Categories should, firstly, “reflect the purpose of the research” (p. 183), which will move the researcher toward an answer to the question. Categories should also be mutually exclusive and exhaustive (all the data fits somewhere, but in only one place). I would, accordingly, transcribe recorded interviews, develop categories for the results, and then organize or code the interview data into those categories, keeping in mind that altering the categories may be necessary.
Research methodology summary

This section describes the decisions I have made in regards to methods I would employ in my study. I have outlined the literature that has informed these decisions.

The next, and final, section of this paper is comprised of the actual research proposal.

Research Proposal

Note to reader: the research proposal which follows is written with an intended audience of an appropriate school division official. The proposal uses an outline similar to that which my school board might require as part of an application to conduct research within the school division.

Overview of research study

The purpose of this research study is to discover if aspects of school structure and culture, sometimes named hidden curriculum, have impacts on some students that ultimately reduce the likelihood that some students will complete high school in three years.

The objective of this research study is to answer the question which follows: In the perception of students at risk of not graduating, what are the school-related factors that, individually or cumulatively, impact the students in a negative way?

This research study aims to listen to students’ perceptions, and to report on the analysis of the data collected. It is my hope that the results would provide ideas for change upon which school administration and staff could act.

The literature about hidden curriculum tells us that some students can be marginalized through school contexts such as school culture, and adults who relate to the students in an unsupportive, or uncaring, way (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Fine, 1991; Lessard, 2008). Students could also be affected by school processes such as curriculum, programs, resources, rules, and
general organization (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Rumberger, 2004; Wehlage, 1986). These contexts and processes could be intentional, or unintentional. They can be explicit and easily identifiable, or they can be an implicit undercurrent within school dynamics (Davies & Guppy, 2006; Vallance, 1973). These school-related factors can have cumulative effects, as students can be affected by multiple factors, and can be affected over time. While family factors and personal conditions are not the focus of this paper, they certainly interact with school-related factors to increase risk for the student, or to increase protective capability. Advocates including Alberta Education (2009) and Ontario Mental Health (Ferguson et al., 2005) encourage schools to identify such school-related factors, and to alter them.

**Research methodology**

This research would be qualitative, using a case study approach, with boundaries of looking solely at students who are identified as not being able to meet the requirements to graduate high school in three years. The study would use a phenomenological orientation to allow participants to speak of their lived school experience; this would provide rich data that may point to individual factors as well as co-mingled and cumulative factors. Data would be collected through a semi-structured interview process.

I am an assistant principal at the school where the research would occur. Ethical considerations associated with knowing the participants, and protecting their vulnerability, are discussed in the Ethics Review, in Appendix B of this paper.

**Description and recruitment of participants**

Participants in this proposed study would be grade 12 (final year) students who may not, or do not, have sufficient credits, or the required courses, to meet the requirements for a Province of Alberta high school diploma. I would eliminate from this list any student who would be
within 5 credits, or one required course, of completion, by June of that school year. (There are a number of reasons, outside of institutional factors, that a student could be in this situation.)

Students may be well suited as potential participants if they:

- are two or more courses, or ten or more credits, away from completion, or
- have a history prior to this school year of failed courses, or
- have failed the same course more than once, and
- are in the alpha half of students for whom I do not have administrative oversight

This case study aims to include up to five participants. Potential participants would be recruited through an initial conversation with their guidance counsellor. Guidance counsellors have detailed knowledge of, and conversations about, student progress toward graduation. If students decline to participate, they would be assured that there would be absolutely no ramification as they complete their school year.

**Informed consent**

Students and parent or guardian would be required to consent, in writing, to the student’s participation in the study. A copy of the letter requesting consent has been placed as Appendix C to this paper.

**Data collection and analysis**

Participants would be involved in one interview with the researcher. The interview would take place in a neutral location of the student’s choosing.

The semi-structured interview would consist of a small number of probing statements and open-ended questions, designed to allow participants to relate their school experiences as stories, such as the probing statements that follow:
• Tell me about times in high school when you have felt supported by school staff, or when you have felt like you were not supported by school staff.

• Talk about your experiences in selecting courses for each new school year (Part 1). Explain how you worked through changes to your course selection that you had to make as a result of failing a course (Part 2).

• Describe where you fit as a member of the school community. For example: friends, clubs, or interests beyond classes, relationships with staff members.

The interview would be recorded by digital audio. The recording would be labelled in a way that does not identify participants, and it would be stored with encryption and a secure username and password. The researcher would transcribe the recording into a word processed format. That file would be labelled in a way that does not identify participants, and it would be kept secure until it is destroyed, as per the school board policy regarding such storage of data.

The researcher is the only person who would have access to this raw data.

The data from all the interviews would be amalgamated into categories that help the researcher to see what the common issues might be. The final report would discuss the amalgamated results, and would be shared with school staff.

Dissemination of results

The final report would be shared with school staff only. It is not intended as an academic assignment, or for publishing. A copy would be forwarded to the School Board office that approves research, for their files, as part of the requirement for conducting research in a school.

Conclusion

In his forward to critical education theorist Paulo Friere’s book (2006), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaul encapsulated a thought which has greatly inspired my research:
There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom’, the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (2006, p. 34).

While many Alberta students thrive in our educational system, or at least survive to graduate in the three years that is typical, my energy has often gone to those who fare less well. Shaull encourages me to endeavour, in the microenvironment of my school, to learn from the students’ reality, and using their knowledge, to create processes which do in fact free them to participate in their education. Because hidden curriculum delivers messages for such students to learn, and to recognize in their involvement with education, a key task of new processes would be to teach awareness to both staff and students of those factors that may be educational barriers. Constructing an understanding of the limiting factors is, for struggling students, the foundation to embracing fully a new freedom for them to own, and to direct, their learning.
References


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Appendix A

List of Terms

**At-risk student**: youth can be at risk of a range of concerns, including drug use, self-harm, sexual exploitation. For this paper, the term refers to students who are at risk of leaving school prior to completing high school, or not completing in 3, 4, or 5 years of high school (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 3).

**Dropout**: called *leavers* by Alberta Education, and defined as students who started grade 10 (beginning of high school), and after three (or four, or five) years have not completed high school, or have not continued schooling (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 3); called *early school leavers* by others including Ferguson et al. (2005, p. 11). Alberta Education tracks data of students in their third, fourth, and fifth years of high school course completion, hence this is included in their definition. The term *dropout* may be decreasing in common usage; more current literature tends to use the other terms listed.

**Expel**: to remove a student from school, or from one or more courses, for a period of more than 10 school days (Alberta Education, 2011, p. 12). There must be provision for the expelled student to attend at a different school or program within the district.

**Hidden curriculum**: Vallance (1973, p. 7) describes the term as being loosely understood, but a composite of the non-academic outcomes that children might learn at school. This may include social structure and authority, moral education, rules of relationship with teachers, and reinforcement of class structure and social norms. The concept is explored in the paper as an evolving notion that would not be limited to the influences listed by Vallance but would also be responsive to changing social and political attitudes.
**High school diploma:** the Alberta high school diploma is received by students who have completed a prescribed combination of required courses, courses selected from a list, and sufficient total credits. Details are on the Alberta Education website, in the Guide to Education (2011, pp. 86-87).

**Leavers:** students from the Grade 10 cohort who have not completed, or are not continuing, their high school education are considered *leavers* (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 3). This term applies even if these students did not actually leave school prior to the end of their third year. Some literature uses the term *non-completers* to refer to a similar situation. There is an effort in some literature to distinguish between the decisive act of leaving school, and the passive circumstance of not leaving, but not succeeding in finishing (as with *non-completers*). This may create difficulty for statisticians, as students may leave school, and then return, before or after the typical three year completion period. The term *leavers* encompasses all situations.

**School-related factors:** a term that identifies characteristics of a school that could protect students and support their success, or that could put students at risk of not being successful in completing high school (Alberta Education, 2009; Ferguson et al., 2005).
Appendix B

Ethics Review

Note to readers: The school board to which I would apply to conduct the proposed study has a formatted Ethics Review Application, to be used by any researcher who has not had an Ethics Review completed by their affiliated institution. Such an Ethics Review Application includes requests for identifiable details, and information which identifies the school board, and thus is not suitable for inclusion in this academic paper. What follows is the information that would comprise the actual ethics portion of the application, without including other identifying details. In other words, I am not including the application itself; I am, however, including the questions from the application that are relevant to ethical research.

Study Title

Seeking the Hidden Curriculum in One High School

Potential Participants

Participants would be five students in grade 12 at one high school. Full details about potential participants, and their recruitment, is included in the Research Application. Informed consent would be required for participation, from the student and their parent or guardian. The Request for Informed Consent is included, as Appendix C of this academic paper.

Withdrawal from the Study

Participants may choose to withdraw from the study, and their data would not be used. At the point that their data has been aggregated, however, it would not be possible to withdraw the data.
Follow-up with Participants

Participants would be invited to see the final report, and any recommendations, in a meeting with the researcher. This would occur three to four months following the research interview.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

The recorded audio and transcript of the interview would be filed electronically, with a non-identifying label. The data files would be kept secure on the researcher’s personal computer, which is password-protected, and is not on a network. The researcher is the only person who would view the data files. The data files would be destroyed after 3 years.

Estimation of Risk to Participants

1. Potential for coercion – participants may feel some pressure to participate in the study because the study is conducted by an assistant principal, who has real or perceived relational power. This risk is managed by: a) having recruitment initiated by the guidance counsellor, who would reinforce the voluntary nature of participation, b) informing the parent/guardian that participation is voluntary, c) working with students who are not in the portion of the alphabet with whom the assistant principal works directly, thus reducing the power differential, and possibility of perceived retribution.

2. Potential that questions are embarrassing or upsetting – participants may become upset as they recount stories of situations that led toward school failure. Participants would be encouraged to see their guidance counsellor, should they encounter these feelings.

3. Potential for social risk, loss of status or privacy – there is no risk of loss of privacy, or status. Participation is confidential, and interviews are individual, and off-campus.
4. Potential for physical risk – there is no risk of physical harm.

5. Potential for deception or withholding information from participants – there is no risk of deception.
Appendix C

This appendix comprises the Request for Informed Consent information as it is required by my school board. The Request of Informed Consent would be submitted using the school board’s complete template if this research were to be activated.

Request for Informed Consent (Sample)

**Researcher identity:**
- Name would go here
- Assistant Principal, High School
- Contact information would go here

**Title of the Research Project:**
Seeking the Hidden Curriculum in One High School

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. Please take the time to read this carefully in order to understand any accompanying information. If you would like more details about this project or anything not mentioned here, please feel free to ask.

The consent form is written as if speaking to the participating student. Parent or guardian, you may replace you with your child throughout the document.

The School Board has approved this research study.

**Purpose and Use of the Research:**
This study will explore what characteristics within the school might make it more difficult for some students to complete high school in three years.

The study aims to explore the experiences of some grade 12 students who are at risk of not completing high school by the end of their third year. I am interested in hearing about some aspects of high school life over the past three years. You have been identified as a possible participant in the study because you are in grade 12, and may not graduate in this school year. This study is not associated with any external organization. It is being completed by a school administrator. Study results will be considered by school administrators and staff, who may make changes to school organization, programs, or culture based on what is learned from the results. Study results will be used only within the school. A copy of the results will be forwarded to the School Board office that approves research in schools, for their files.
What will I be asked to do?
You will participate in one interview session with the assistant principal. Please note that the assistant principal is acting as a researcher in this study, not as a school administrator. The interview may last up to two hours, and will take place in a mutually agreed upon location outside of the school.

You will be asked questions about various components of school life, such as the kinds of support you have felt from school staff, about how you have gone about selecting courses, and about how welcome and comfortable you have felt as a member of the school.

You are asked to be thoughtful about your experiences in high school. You are encouraged to be honest in your responses. The information that is gathered will be amalgamated in a way that makes it impossible to identify any student. Names will not be used in the report, nor will any identifying descriptions or direct quotes.

You will be invited to see the final report, and any recommendations, in a meeting with the researcher. This would occur three to four months following the research interview.

Is my participation voluntary?
You are not required to participate in this research. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw your participation at any point during the interview, or following the interview. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your data will not be used. At the point that your data has been compiled with the group data and made anonymous, however, it will not be possible to withdraw your data.

What type of personal information will be collected?
No personal identifying information will be collected in this study, and all participants shall remain anonymous.

The interview will be digitally recorded so that the researcher can easily capture what was said. The researcher will transcribe the interview into written form, after the interview. The recording will be filed with a label that does not include your name or other identifying information. The recording will be kept in a secure location, and it will be destroyed after 3 years.

I grant permission to be digitally audio recorded: Yes: ___ No: ___

Are there any potential risks or discomforts as a result of participating in this study?
You may feel uncomfortable or sad, during or after the interview, as you reflect on the past three years in high school, including reflecting on some situations or experiences that may have been difficult for you. You may, if you wish, see your school counsellor following the interview, to talk about anything that has bothered you.

You may feel uncomfortable sharing your reflections with a school administrator. Keep in mind that the administrator is acting only as the researcher in this case. Any concerns that you discuss would remain confidential, and would not be re-visited as part of your school day.
How do I benefit from this study?
This study will primarily benefit future students at the school, with any improvements that may result from what is learned in the study. The study will assist school staff in understanding what school has been like for some students who have not been fully successful, and will help staff make changes in programs, school organization, or school culture, as a result.

You may benefit from reflecting on your high school experiences, and what you may have learned. You may develop some new understandings as a result of reflecting on your past three years. The new understandings may be helpful to you, particularly if you plan to complete your diploma after your experience at this school is over.

What happens to the information I provide?
The interview will be recorded by digital audio recorder. The recording will be labelled in a way that does not identify you, and it will be kept in a secure location until it is destroyed. The researcher will transcribe the recording into a word processed format. That file will be labelled in a way that does not identify you, and will be kept secure until it is destroyed. The researcher is the only person who will have access to this raw data.

The data from all the interviews will be amalgamated into categories that help the researcher to see what the common issues might be. The final report will discuss the amalgamated results, and will be shared with school staff. It will not discuss individual comments.

Written consent and signatures:
Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant’s Name: ____________________________
Participant’s Signature ____________________________ Date: _______________
Name of the parent/guardian for students under the age of 18________________________
Signature of parent/guardian ____________________________ Date_________________
Researcher’s Name: ____________________________
Researcher’s Signature: ____________________________ Date: ______________
Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns about this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Name(s):
Organization:
Phone number:
Email address:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

If you have any concerns about the way you’ve been treated as a participant, please contact …

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The researcher has kept a copy of the consent form.