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The Null Curriculum: Its Theoretical Basis and Practical Implications

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ABSTRACT

In this essay we take a critical look at the concept of “null curriculum”—what schools do not teach—and ask two questions: 1) Can the term “null curriculum” be defined adequately for curriculum theorizing?, and 2) Is this concept in any way useful for practice? Our consideration of the null curriculum centers on its possible uses in terms of theory, research, and practice. In each of these areas, particular attention is given to the problems involved in clearly defining this rather ambiguous concept. We note that conceptions of curriculum play the dominant role in how null curriculum is defined, and point out that a given null curriculum can be identified only in relation to what is valued as educationally significant. Although the notion of null curriculum cannot be defined in precise terms, we conclude that it does have worthwhile application in certain practical areas of curriculum development and evaluation.

It is not uncommon for two curriculum specialists to discuss their field at great length before discovering that each is using the term “curriculum” to mean something quite different. In discussing curriculum, therefore, we often feel compelled to make distinctions between various curricular perspectives such as “interactive,” “preactive,” “explicit,” “hidden,” “intended,” and “actualized.” Moreover, it would seem that curriculum theorists are forever busy inventing new terms to describe different aspects of curriculum theory that have previously gone unexamined. Unfortunately, this plethora of terms and competing definitions often contributes to the general confusion in a field that is, by its very nature, loaded with ambiguities. In this essay, we take a critical look at one such expression, “the null curriculum,” and ask two questions: 1) Can “the null curriculum” be defined adequately for curriculum theorizing? and 2) Is this concept in any way useful for research or practice?

Defining the Null Curriculum

Elliot Eisner (1985) suggests that all schools “teach” three curricula: the explicit, the implicit, and the null. The explicit curriculum simply refers to publicly announced programs of study—what the school advertises that it is prepared to provide. Such a program typically includes courses in mathematics, science, social studies, English, art, and physical education. The implicit curriculum, on the other hand, includes values and expectations generally not included in the formal curriculum, but nevertheless learned by students as part of their school experience. All students, for example, learn that knowledge can be divided into subjects and labeled “math,” “English,” “art,” “biology,” “history,” and so on; or, that the distance between excellence and failure can be measured in increments of A, B, C, D, and F. The null curriculum Eisner defines as what schools do not teach:

. . . the options students are not afforded, the perspectives they may never know about, much less be able to use, the concepts and skills that are not part of their intellectual repertoire (1985, p. 107).

The null curriculum explicitly calls our attention to what has long been a matter of common sense—that, when developing a curriculum, we leave things out. It is a truism of the curriculum field that schools cannot teach everything. Like economists concerned with the distribution of scarce goods, curricularists must be concerned with the allocation of limited school resources to educationally beneficial ends. As all economic wants cannot be satisfied, all demands for curriculum inclusion cannot be met. Although this observation may seem obvious, it is not trivial. Some notion of a null curriculum underpins much of our thinking on curricular issues. For example, radical social theorists, such as Michael Apple, attach seminal importance to a given null curriculum for certain social classes. Their use of the null curriculum, although largely implicit, is fundamental to defining the boundaries of their concern for educational equality. Eisner argues more generally that what is *not* taught may be as educationally significant as what is taught:

I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem (1985, p. 97).

In effect, Eisner is claiming that the null curriculum is, whether recognized or assumed, an educational issue of the first order. Given that several nationally recognized studies (e.g., *A Nation at Risk*, 1983; Boyer, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Sizer, 1984) have recently proposed major curricular reforms, it would seem an appropriate time to take a careful look at this particular concept. Therefore, let us now turn to considering more specifically what the null curriculum is. From that point, we will be in a better position to ask what it might contribute to our understanding of curricular processes.

Dimensions of the Null Curriculum

Like many terms used in the curriculum field, “the null curriculum” is a multi-faceted concept. Eisner himself identifies two major dimensions of the null curriculum: intellectual processes and subject matter. These two dimensions may be supplemented by a third, that of affect.

In the realm of intellectual processes Eisner cites examples such as visual, auditory, metaphoric, and synesthetic modes of thought which are nonverbal and allogical (1985: 98). These styles of cognitive processing are less likely to be reflected in school curriculum than are processes such as logical analysis or deductive reasoning. We should note that there is some controversy over whether process in general can be meaningfully separated from subject matter, and we are inclined to agree that, at a practical level, they cannot be so separated. Nevertheless, certain processes are relevant to a wide variety of subjects across educational programs, and this suggests that there is some value in considering process as a distinctive dimension of the null curriculum even if each process identified must be filled out with some subject matter as its object.

Concerning content Eisner gives examples of subject areas such as economics, law, psychology, and anthropology which are likely to fall into the null curriculum for most elementary and secondary schools (1985: 103). It is possible to consider this dimension of the null curriculum in terms of a hierarchy. This hierarchy extends from the exclusion of entire disciplines to the omission of particular bits of information. Eisner’s examples mentioned above illustrate entire fields that are often omitted at given educational levels. Null content can also consist of sub-fields within a discipline. History courses, for example, seldom devote much attention to the history of science. Topics within sub-fields represent yet a more specific level at which we may identify components of null content. The concept of evolution omitted from a biology curriculum would be an example of this type of exclusion. Finally, null content can be considered in terms of particular facts. For example, an American history unit focusing on the New Deal without reference to the failure of the New Deal to solve the unemployment problem would consign this bit of information to the null curriculum.

Still another dimension of the null curriculum is affect. This dimension includes elements such as values, attitudes, and emotions. Eisner includes this particular dimension as a sub-set of intellectual processes. While affect accompanies cognition, it may be useful to separate affect from processes that are more readily identified with cognition. Some critics of schooling have claimed that schools should not involve themselves in the transmission of values at all (Bereiter, 1973). Certainly, during the formulation of educational goals, affect is frequently separated from cognitive functions, and often the cognitive functions are considered the more important part of this supposed dichotomy. Yet to classify affect as a sub-set of intellectual processes is to downgrade affect almost automatically. It is, perhaps, also a case of hiding a very impor-

tant matter from ourselves—that we consign many topics to the null curriculum because of their potential affective impact. There are, it would seem, certain feelings and degrees of feeling that we do not want to induce in classrooms. Hence our desire to nullify various feelings guides the selection of content. It may be, then, that affect is the primary and most important single dimension of the null curriculum.

The fact that we can lay out particular dimensions of the null curriculum and consider various examples suggests that any analysis which can be made of existing curriculum can also be made of null curriculum. This would require, however, that we first explicitly identify the contents of a given null curriculum. Our ability to do so, to describe what does not exist, is considered below as a theoretical problem.

Theoretical Approaches to the Null Curriculum

Just as our conceptions of curriculum define possibilities for content inclusion, so do these conceptions define the null curriculum. This can be most readily illustrated by using examples from two well-known perspectives on school curriculum.

The first perspective is concerned with the development of intellectual processes, emphasizing process over content. *What* students learn is considered less important than *how* they learn. Such an approach assumes a transfer of learning strategies from one experience to another. The work of Jerome Bruner (1960) drew heavily on this curricular orientation. *Man: A Course of Study (M.A.C.O.S.)* is representative of this approach, stressing student inquiry—that students learn how to learn (Bruner, 1960: 47)—while the particular content of the curriculum is of secondary importance. The null curriculum of Bruner’s program included not only much of the history and geography traditionally taught in elementary schools, but also those processes which these curriculum makers considered unimportant or nontransferable. M.A.C.O.S., reflecting a particular approach to curriculum design, re-defined what was taught in certain classrooms, and thus redefined the null curriculum.

It is worth noting, here, that many of those who opposed M.A.C.O.S. had a specific null curriculum in mind, and this reinforces our earlier contention on the significance of affect. M.A.C.O.S. opponents wanted to *exclude* anything that smacked of “relativism,” and many also opposed inclusion of materials that they regarded as emotional “therapy.” If M.A.C.O.S. writers had thought about deliberate construction of a null curriculum before hand, they might have found strategies to accomplish their cognitive goals without arousing so much animosity. (Or, of course, they might have made their values explicit and accepted a smaller initial audience.) In any case, implementation of M.A.C.O.S. served to uncover a hitherto partially hidden or, perhaps, implicit null curriculum!

A second common orientation to curriculum we will refer to as the liberal education view. Robert Maynard Hutchins (1972) perhaps defined this view most clearly:

Liberal education consists of training in the liberal arts and of understanding the leading ideas that have animated mankind. It aims to help the human being learn to think for himself, to develop his highest human powers . . . it has never been denied that this education was the best for the best (1972, p. 83).

The “best,” in Hutchins’ view, translates into a core of traditional, academic subjects—history, language, mathematics, and science. This emphasis is likely to be implemented at the expense of other, “non-academic,” programs such as career education or vocational training. Moreover, within these traditional core subjects, content is likely to reflect academic concerns. Science fiction novels, for example, will probably not find their way into an English curriculum based on the liberal education view. As with the process view of curriculum, this view creates its own distinctive null curriculum.

It is worth noting, however, that in our examples we have considered only null curricula produced and uncovered by explicit programs. Yet pursuing this notion a little further, we can also identify a null curriculum created by an implicit curriculum. Let us use the liberal arts view as an example. Hutchins’ conception of the “best” refers to the trained intellect. This is explicit. This explicit belief, however, rests upon implicit assumptions which equate our “highest human powers” with a traditional academic view of the intellect. It is well to ask whether or not the trained intellect is indeed the “highest” of “human powers.” Could we not reasonably embrace multiple models of human excellence? Might not, for example, moral goodness be of equal importance? For our purposes, it seems that the liberal education view *implicitly* creates a null curriculum—or at least a deepening of the explicit null curriculum. This implicit or deepened null curriculum would contain all that does not satisfy the implicit criterion that the trained intellect is the highest expression of what it means to be human.

Our examination of these curricular orientations illustrates that any attempt to identify a given set of processes or content as “the null curriculum” is dependent on some general frame of reference. Unless the null curriculum contains elements from some universe of content perceived as educationally significant, then any definition of a null curriculum becomes meaningless. No one would claim, for instance, that the failure of kindergartens to teach advanced calculus constitutes the relegation of that subject matter to the null curriculum. Rather, the universe of possible kindergarten programs does not contain advanced calculus. Even in this context, however, a given null curriculum can be identified only in relation to what we value as educationally significant.

The Null Curriculum as a Research Concept

It is apparent from our discussion thus far that the null curriculum can be identified only when a curriculum universe can be specified; we cannot describe a null curriculum completely by simply examining an existing curriculum. Even when the existing curriculum is specified as a list of

behaviorally stated objectives, we cannot provide a complementary list that specifies the null curriculum unless we have an initial, complete list that represents a curriculum universe. If we have a specified curriculum universe, then we may hold an explicit curriculum in one hand—so to speak—and a null curriculum in the other. But it seems obvious that Eisner and others who see the null curriculum as a useful theoretical tool would object strenuously to this use of the concept on the grounds that it has been trivialized. “See here,” they might say, “the *real* ‘null curriculum’ is everything on neither of these lists. You folks have missed the point entirely!”

As we try to remain faithful to the spirit of the expression “null curriculum,” we may begin to wonder whether the expression has any meaning useful for research. Its use seems to be exhortative. One using it wants to draw something to our attention, to counsel caution, to urge us toward open-mindedness. Employed in exhortative efforts, “null curriculum” may very well have practical uses, but to be directly useful for either theory or research, a concept must have meaning beyond the exhortative. In particular, to be useful in empirical research, the expression must have a referent—it must pick out something in the real world or it must be posited as something that stands behind or underlies things actually picked out in the real world (as “intelligence” is posited to account for performance on certain tests). But considering the “null curriculum” as something underlying observables requires us to look at “nullness” as an attribute of curriculum, and such a move surely requires a definition of curriculum.

But it seems likely that those who use “null curriculum” are exactly those who resist giving a specific, operational definition of curriculum. The difficulties that plague those of us who prefer “interactive” views of curriculum, “open education,” or “intuitive methods” appear again and with renewed force. There is justification for insisting that talk about education and curriculum theorizing must, by the nature of the enterprises themselves, contain some vagueness and ambiguity. But, given this inherent ambiguity, we must be especially careful to avoid proliferation of unnecessary expressions that only create confusion. Our efforts should go into careful elaboration of our initial undefined terms, and this is best done through description, analysis, and interpretation of concrete cases in ordinary language—language that avoids the “names and games” of experimental science.

One can list a host of terms that have been demeaned (and even discarded) when attempts were made to transfer them from hermeneutic and practical domains into the domain of experimental research. We have already mentioned “open education” and “intuition”; we might add “discovery,” “learning to learn,” “heuristic teaching,” “cognitive structure,” and even “individualization.” At least some of these terms possess enormous potential in the domains of interpretation and practice. Their recalcitrance as research concepts should not prevent their use and elaboration in practice. But others of them—perhaps “cognitive structure,” for example—add nothing to the practical arenas in which they are

sometimes used, and they deserve to be scrutinized in the domain of research. A rule of thumb for deciding where to locate terms is this: If a term is involved in empirical claims such as “Individualization secures desirable outcomes of the kind X,” then that term should be suitably operationalized for empirical research. If, on the other hand, a writer sets out to describe a set of methods generally referred to as “intuitive” or a set of exercises that might be given over to students for exploration and possible “discovery,” there seems to be no compelling reason to define these terms unambiguously. Indeed, to do so would be to diminish their power to evoke imaginative thinking.

We would argue strongly, then, that “the null curriculum” should not be construed as a research concept—certainly not as a concept that should be the object of experimental research. It is conceivable that it could be useful in a mode analogous to historical research. We might, for example, look carefully at some group for whom a particular lack (a particular null curriculum) can be defined and attempt to make connections between that lack and later occurrences. But, of course, such a possibility only underscores our recommendation that the expression be exercised in interpretive and practical domains.

Can the concept be used in other forms of “qualitative” research? Undoubtedly, it is already being implicitly so employed. Researchers who observe, describe, and interpret curricular events almost inevitably have some curriculum universe in mind and, therefore, also have an evaluative eye on the null curriculum. Caution is needed here. A strong writer with passionate convictions about what should be in the curriculum can deliver a devastating critique of given curricular happenings. A balanced account requires a counter-description from the perspective of those who have chosen and implemented the curriculum. Thus, we would argue that the concept of a null curriculum is not one that can be operationalized as the object of empirical research; it cannot in itself point the researcher to any particular body of material. The “nothing” it points to is subjectively established. But the concept is useful at a meta-level in that its consideration can draw the researcher’s attention to his or her own values and preferences and to those of others. So reminded, the researcher may be more careful in giving appropriate attention to the values and interpretations of those involved in the situations to be studied.

Practical Uses of the Null Curriculum

In discussing the null curriculum thus far we have tried to consider its value and limitations from a variety of perspectives. We have already noted the exhortative function it may play in curricular deliberations. In this regard, we may sit back and speculate, for example, on the consequences of *not* exposing young women to training in auto mechanics or young men to training in the culinary arts. Beyond this rather straightforward use, we see a number of less obvious uses served by a practical

examination of what our schools do not teach. First, attention to the null curriculum helps assure a thorough and deliberative consideration of relevant alternatives for content selection. Second, it encourages us to reexamine goals and selection criteria in light of content. And finally, the null curriculum may be useful in bringing into sharp focus our knowledge of implementation possibilities.

In the first instance, null curriculum analysis simply offers an alternative perspective from which to view decisions of content inclusion and exclusion. We begin with a set of educational goals and ask what curricular alternatives will be considered. This question is qualitatively different from asking what content and sequence are most instrumental to accomplishing our goals. The former question urges us toward receptivity and openness, while the latter question urges us toward narrowing the field and arriving at a decision. While the means for examining a null curriculum may take rather analytical forms such as making lists or grids which suggest inclusion possibilities, the utility of the "analysis" is heuristic, dependent on the insight, imagination, and intuition of those who contribute to the decision-making process. We should note, also, that a consideration of null curriculum as concept may lead curriculum makers to ask explicitly about views or facts to be excluded; that is, instead of waiting for a finished curriculum to bring various contested values to light, curriculum makers might search for these potential rejects at the outset.

During various stages of curriculum development, the connections between content, selection criteria, and goals are often assumed and sometimes lost in the shuffle to maintain a coherent program. The second possible function of considering null curriculum is to help establish, or reestablish, a dialectic between content and goals. We begin with a curriculum which includes A, B, and C, but which does not include X, Y, and Z. Now the question is what might X, Y, and Z tell us about our selection criteria and goals? Suppose, for example, that topic X is to be dropped from a mathematics curriculum. Our analysis induces us to ask why it should be dropped, and the answer is that X is no longer important in the repertoire of practicing mathematicians. Is this, then, to be our criterion for the selection of mathematical topics, i.e., that they be of current mathematical importance? Suppose a topic is useful for the *learning* of mathematics even though mature mathematicians never consider or use it? Perhaps we need more than one criterion. It should be clear that this process will not necessarily restore X to the curriculum, but it will tend to make us more self-conscious of the process by which we make curricular decisions.

A final function served by attention to the null curriculum is in helping us define the limitations and opportunities for curriculum implementation. This function moves us from a focus on content selection to a focus on classroom structure, the availability of resources, and school policy. For example, suppose we visit a school and find that students rarely or never work together in solving problems or completing academic tasks. Cooperative problem solving is simply part of the null cur-

riculum. We also learn that cooperative problem solving, in the abstract, is highly endorsed by the goals of the school and community. Now our knowledge of its neglect pushes us to ask a new set of questions—not only design questions (e.g., “What would cooperative problem solving look like in the classroom?”), but also implementation questions (e.g., “What knowledge and support would teachers need in order to provide for cooperative problem solving activities?,” “What conditions would allow for or promote cooperative problem solving?,” and “What educational policies would secure these conditions?”). Again, we can ask questions about values, too, such as “What values are in conflict with the one verbally endorsed?” and “Why do these folks say one thing and do another?” In this regard, asking about what is not taught throws into relief the fact that curriculum practice is intimately concerned not only with the nature of learning, but also with the nature of valuing and of schooling.

Conclusions

Our reasoning leads us to conclude that the notion of a null curriculum does have a number of worthwhile applications in particular areas of curriculum development. We must accept, however, that like many concepts in our field, the “null curriculum” cannot be defined with operational precision unless we are willing to risk triviality. Certainly this limits its utility, particularly as a theoretical or research concept. Nevertheless, we suggest that this concept has significant interpretative and exhortative functions. In this context, it serves to remind us that the deliberative nature of our work depends on broad rather than specialized knowledge of curricular options. It also serves to remind us that our work demands imagination. John Stuart Mill (1838) wrote on the null curriculum (albeit implicitly) when he said of Jeremy Bentham:

The Imagination which he [Bentham] had not was . . . that which enables us, by a voluntary effort, to conceive the absent as if it were present, the imaginary as if it were real, and to clothe it in the feelings which, if it were indeed real, it would bring along with it. This is the power by which one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another. This power constitutes the poet. . . . Without it nobody knows even his own nature . . . nor the nature of his fellow-creatures. . . . By these limits, accordingly, Bentham’s knowledge of human nature is bounded. . . . Other ages and other nations were a blank to him for purposes of instruction. He measured them but by one standard: their knowledge of facts, and their capability to take correct views of utility.

Mill could have been writing of and for contemporary curriculum workers.

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