

**Hidden curriculum and hegemonic culture:
some examples in Italian school
in the first decades of National life
(1860-1900)**

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Sulla base delle definizioni accreditate di curricolo nascosto, questo contributo si sofferma sull'accezione negativa dell'espressione, vale a dire i messaggi impliciti nella pratica scolastica, nel clima sociale, negli atteggiamenti disciplinari e materiali, che veicolano agli alunni valori, comportamenti e credenze conformi all'ideologia dominante in un certo momento. Il discorso procede su un livello storico, analizzando questa particolare accezione nella scuola italiana post-unitaria in parallelo con le scelte conservatrici della politica del tempo.

The author deals with the negative definition of hidden curriculum, when it refers to "values, attitudes and behaviors unintentionally and unconsciously transferred by teachers to pupils". This definition, then, is analyzed in the context of Italian situation, immediately after Nation political unification in 1861, and is discussed in relation with political cultural choices and social conditions.

Parole chiave: scuola, curriculum, curriculum nascosto, cultura egemone, politica
Keywords: school, curriculum, hidden curriculum, cultural hegemony, politics

1. *To begin: a question of definition*

Even if my speech deals with a particular style of hidden curriculum in a particular period of our national history, it is necessary to start with a definition.

“Hidden curriculum” is generally presented in educational and didactical essays as in many dictionaries of education and of sociology (quoted in bibliographical references at the end of this paper) in three different ways, i. e. to indicate 1) values, attitudes and behaviors unintentionally and unconsciously transferred by teachers to pupils; 2) a different message from the official curriculum, which is offered just hiding from the official power; 3) a student's own agenda regarding the formal and official curriculum, i.e. how he or she transfers what he or she is learning into his/her cultural back-ground.

It is evident that the definitions two and three are positive, because

they stress, on one side, the implicit power of education to contrast the spirit of conservatism, tradition and conformism and, on the other, its value in the process of construction and re-construction of individual identity and socio-cultural consciousness.

On the contrary, the first definition is negative: describing what pupils can learn in the school apart from formal curriculum, usually it stresses how school-learning contribute to adequate young generations to accept and to reproduce, out of the school and in their future life, the cultural orientation of their own society.

In this perspective, the hidden curriculum, as reported by Jackson (the first to use this definition) in 1968, does not depend only on one teacher, but is rather a general process by which children learn to conform and adapt to the expectations of a particular society and, we can add, also to its rules, to its social habits and, above all, to its ideological beliefs. It is to be stressed that such an orientation, which is open and evident in the propaganda in any dictatorship, nevertheless is actually present in any kind of political government. The outcome is the same in both cases, as the history of education shows, and this is the ground on which an ideology can be survive and reproduce its social and political fruits.

Classics of educational theory – we can quote Emile Durkheim, on one side, and John Dewey on the other¹ – have understood this particular effect implied in any formal educational agency. It is unavoidable and even necessary: firstly because, as Jackson (1968) stresses, education (above all inside the school) is always and anywhere a process of socialization and secondly because every teaching/learning activity is not neutral and objective but is the “mirror” of a teacher’s *Weltanschauung* and the outcome of a relation with pupils’ perspectives, they receive in their families, in the peer group and so on. As I have said some years ago², in every classroom, different microcosms (rich of various ideas, beliefs and habits) met and work together.

¹ Émile Durkheim sustained that schools reflect the larger society of which they are a part so that school organization cannot but reflect the values that societal system interacting with its educational proposals (see *L'éducation morale*, 1903). For Dewey the most meaningful reference is to *Experience and Education*, one of his latest works, in 1938, where he explicitly spoke in the third chapter of a “collateral learning”, thanks to which pupils accidentally acquire enduring attitudes, likes and dislikes.

² See L. Bellatalla (a cura di), *L'insegnante tra realtà e utopia*, Roma, Anicia, 2011.

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1. *Interesting aspects of the hidden curriculum*

Before describing what happens in Italian school after National unification (1861) till the beginning of the new century, I have to list the main and most meaningful aspects of hidden curriculum according to the definition I have privileged. As Rowtree³ wrote, in an educational institution, the hidden curriculum refers to the way in which cultural values and attitudes are passed to the students not through formal teaching, but unconsciously, i.e. through the structure of teaching and the organization of schools and through what the institution demands of the students. Think of regularity of work, defense of authority, and so on. Philip Jackson in his *Life in the Classroom* (1968) points to three aspects of the hidden curriculum: crowds, praise, and power. These elements imply to be part of a group, to be exposed to a constant evaluation and competition and the distinction between the powerful and the powerless, under the authority of the teacher.

From a historical point of view, we can observe that these three main points, analyzed by Jackson, even if are always to be considered, however, acquire a different meaning not only according to political and ideological circumstances, but also according to the actual didactical and educational model⁴. This implies that the professional training of teachers is a powerful and important instrument to control and avoid the excessive effects of this kind of hidden curriculum. A well-trained teacher is able to prevent this orientation from becoming a kind of implicit doctrinarism.

In a classroom, there are a lot of implicit (material and immaterial) sources of learning: for example, structures of the classroom, furniture, architecture, the teacher's style of explaining and talking, the relationship between teachers and students, standard learning activities, textbooks, didactical aids, disciplinary measures, timetable, and curricular priorities.

As Giovanni Genovesi said in his paper the hidden curriculum is

³ D. Rowtree, *A Dictionary of Education*, London, Harper & Row, 198, p. 115.

⁴ I refer, obviously, to the main didactical models, generally described as authoritarian, democrat and anarchical with three style of teaching, catechetical, dialogic, child-centered.

not intrinsically negative, as far as the involved factors exert a positive developmental force on students: the example of a democratic society, interacting with a democratic style of teaching and a dialogic climate in the classroom generally address the hidden curriculum in a positive direction. But what may happen when teachers are not sufficiently prepared to their complex and difficult task? What may happen when a society is built on the firm belief that every social change is dangerous and social Order (with capital letter!) must be preserved, because social inequalities depend on God Providence, and, then, must not be altered? They should be accepted.

This is just the case of Italy in 1861.

2. *Italian school and Italian society*

On 17th March 1861 Italy, after many centuries under the rule of foreign powerful nations and the territorial partition in a lot of little regional states, became a united and independent kingdom. The conquest of national unity, freedom and political independence was the result of a long period of patriotic risings (as in 1821, 1830 and 1848) and of some independence wars under the flag of Savoia dynasty and the military expedition of Garibaldi in Southern Italy.

Savoia dynasty, till 1861 at the head of Piedmont and Sardinia kingdom, came to the Italian throne and Vittorio Emanuele, becoming the first Italian king was said "Father of the Country".

Obviously, the first reactions to this expected event were enthusiastic; but in a short time, problems and difficulties became evident. Disillusion was not late to come out.

2.1 *Socio-political conditions*

The main problems to be faced were:

- The deep socio-economic differences between the North and the South of the Country, as far as Northern Italy was a modern country, opened to the progress of industrial trend, and Southern Italy had a rural economy and was culturally backward;

- the brigandage in Southern Italy in defense of former Bourbon government;

- the linguistic differences because in every region there was not current Italian language, but were spoken common different dialects

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mutually incomprehensible;

- the illiteracy level was very high: about 80% (average datum), even if, above all, in the Southern Italy the percentage illiterate women reached just 98%.

Political general orientation was moderate and conservative: the ideal was a collaboration among the different social classes so to preserve social order, to control progressive party and to restrain the development of Socialism, which began, in this period, to spread in the country. Cultural and economic change was considered only marginally⁵. Francesco Crispi and Antonio Starabba di Rudinì (two of Italian premiers) at the end of 19th century were particularly repressive, conservative, and endowed with an anti-working classes spirit.

At the beginning of the new century, Giovanni Giolitti, as a moderate progressist, gave a new impulse to Italian society both economically and politically. But unfortunately, he and his government care particularly only for Northern Italy, supported a colonial war (in Libya and Aegean Islands) and, above all, IWW stopped the innovation process⁶. And after the War, the unsatisfactory results of Versailles Peace Treaty caused, after a period of violence and social conflicts, the crisis of Liberal politics and ideals and the success of fascism. And another, sad story began.

2.2 *School Politics*

School politics was the mirror of this general ideological and political trend. Therefore, Italian school system was grounded, as I have already stated⁷, on the following elements:

- Aristocratism, because higher education and university are only for upper classes and call the attention of Public Education ministers;
- Conservatism: every social class is provided with a special kind of education: for workingmen primary school or a vocational curricu-

⁵ Quintino Sella, a Right financial minister, in 1870, sharpened the tax on flour: obviously purchase price of bread rose.

⁶ See L. Bellatalla, G. Genovesi *La Grande Guerra. L'educazione in trappola*, Roma, Aracne, 2015.

⁷ L. Bellatalla, *Da Gentile a Gelmini, quale identità per la scuola italiana?* in S. Baffi, D. Luglio (sous la direction), *Enseignement et identités culturelles dans les pays d'Europe du Sud*, in "Etudes italiennes", 2, 2015, pp. 169-177 (on-line)

lum are sufficient;

- Hierarchy as educational system is structured like a pyramid: at the basis there are people; at the top there is the King.
- Centralization, as far as all the decisions, curricula, ordinances come from the Minister of Public Education. Teachers, consequently, have no autonomy.

To lower classes, women and working-men, i. e. the neediest of education in the Italian society was reserved a noticeably short period of compulsory education. Moreover, primary schools, according to Casati Law (1859), had to be organized, and managed by the Major. So, if a village was too poor, a primary school was not opened. And this was lawful.

Then, from 1861 to 1923 this was the situation:

According to Casati boys and girls are compelled to attend only two years of primary school. Parents who do not respect this “duty” are not fined. Then too many children escape the school.

1877 Coppino Law: the ordinance to attend the school is extended to the fourth class of primary school and the parents who do not respect this “duty” are, almost formally, fined.

1904 Orlando Law: boys and girls have to attend the school till the age of 12 and finally, with Gentile law, in 1923 compulsory school includes primary and high school.

The professional training of school primary teachers too was very basic: they had to study only grammar, arithmetic, history, and geography, and obviously Catholic Doctrine⁸. This elementary curriculum was taught in the so-called Normal schools: the prerequisites to attend them is to be able to read and write. Only at the end of 19th century to this poor curriculum were added notions of Pedagogy and Psychology and only at the end of 19th century, they who wished to become teachers were requested to attend a complementary school as a link from primary to Normal school.

Nevertheless, immediately after the national unification, governors designated many independence war cripples (able, obviously, to read and to write) to the office of teaching as a reward for their services in the army. Moreover, they who did not want to attend Normal school

⁸ Girls must attend also lessons of needlework and boys, after 1870, some lessons or agriculture in a kitchen garden.

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may become teachers if they passed a qualifying examination.

Moreover, the position of a teacher was very precarious; his/her wages were scanty, and old-age pension was not expected.

All these aspects affect the hidden curriculum in the Italian school system, but particularly in the primary school, which, formally, must give hospitality to the children of popular classes.

Consequently, lower classes must acquire habit of obedience and to respect so to meet cultural expectations, to share cultural values and to accept inequalities as necessary and satisfying, according to ideological and cultural perspectives of their times and their nation.

3. *To be an Italian pupil after 1860*

Before entering an Italian classroom, we must consider the material structures of the schools: generally, locations were not suitable for the purpose. Particularly in the villages, whereas town administrations sometimes invested their money in this kind of buildings⁹. Classrooms were often placed inside the town-hall or in former stables or close to a parish church; were packed full, often unhealthy, and not sufficiently ventilated.

In his report of his experience in village of Southern Italy, in 1873, Placido Cerri, who was a teacher of Latin and Greek in a higher school, told that a herd of swine used to enter his classroom looking for pasture: this story shows both the neglected material condition of a school and its hygienic situation¹⁰.

Even in the second half of 19th century, above all thanks to Positivistic educational theory and hygienic advertisements of physicians, it was clear that pupils are not able to pay attention and to learn in poorly ventilated and lit up conditions and compelled to silence and stillness.

The persistent political disengagement to better material school sit-

⁹ N. Sistoli Paoli, *C'era una volta... la scuola di S. Frediano: didattica e vita quotidiana in una scuola elementare di Pisa*, Pisa, ETS, 2003.

¹⁰ See P. Cerri, *Le tribolazioni di un professore di ginnasio*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1988.

uation, especially in the poorest of Italian regions, testifies how and how long Italian governments considered school organization only a useless waste of public money.

If boys and girls attended the lessons, they, particularly in countryside or in working-men families, were not diligent in their attendance, because they had often to help parents in seasonal works or in the brothers' care. Nobody was charged to control their attendance or to prevent their precocious work, even if at home.

This situation is, then, the first source of an implicit learning: for countrymen and workingmen school attendance, on one hand, is a kind of luxury because is a moment of leisure, and, on the other, must not be a pleasant experience, because future workingmen and women ought to be accustomed to suffering, and to labor. For suffering and labor are the "gifts" of their existences as for their parents and grandparents.

Concretely in the classroom Italian boys and girls must be trained to the exercise of their future social role, according to the keywords of their world and their times. So, it is necessary to enter a classroom to analyze not the formal curriculum, but, rather, how the curricular notions were offered and explained. Therefore, we can put into evidence a hidden curriculum, thanks to which hierarchy, authority and social distinctions are interacting so to cause a kind of circle.

The next part of my paper is just devoted to show the material, ritual and structural elements which were able to impose the underlying political and ideological project to young generations.

3.1 *Social climate: hierarchy*

In this first section I intend to describe the structure of a classroom, the behavior, the teacher require to pupils and finally the relations between the teacher and the group of pupils.

Actual classrooms at the end of 19th century are dominated by stillness, order, and silence; surely, there are no freedom nor joy. The model of this kind of school activity comes from barracks.

Not casually, the teacher used to sit in front of his/her pupils on the desk like a clergyman on the pulpit or a king on the throne. The teacher explains, ask the pupils and is their judge: they have to pay attention, to be silent and still, to repeat teacher's words. The structure of the classroom is not suited to a working, vivacious group, but only to passivity and respect for superiors.

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But in front of the teachers there is also a boss: the principal in the school, the rules in the teaching activities, the major, who was their employer, the public opinion, ready to judge also their personal and private behavior, the parish priest, who had to testify their right moral conduct. Relating to all this complex of aspects (politics, religion, laws, social context) the teachers must be as silent and obedient as their pupils.

Then social climate is not but the mirror of collective orientation: young generations have to adapt themselves and, finally, to make the best of circumstances in their adult life.

3.2 *Didactical choices: authority*

The outcome if a spread spirit of hierarchical order cannot be but a similar spread authoritarian spirit, which was evident in teaching style.

Firstly, there are the shared rituals, grounded on the spirit of hierarchy. I refer to everyday prayer at the beginning of the lessons; to the periodical celebrations both of Fatherland anniversaries and of sovereigns' birthdays. Pupils had to learn by heart stories, anecdotes, hymns and songs to celebrate this kind of occasions so to engrave in their memory central events and days of the society, to which they belong.

Secondly, Italian Risorgimento history, as far as public and social disillusion was growing up, became a kind of National mythology to be celebrated, accepted, and not discussed. Pupils, then, were accustomed to venerating heroes like Garibaldi, the memory of the martyrs of Risorgimento and to celebrate the anniversary of important battles of Independence wars. In the classrooms often were hanged, beside the crucifix and King's portrait, pictures of these crucial national events. The pupils were continuously compelled to observe these images, also when the topic of the teacher's explanation was completely different.

Finally, just didactical style: teachers required a by heart learning, without any autonomous elaboration. On the ground of their insufficient professional training and thanks to school catechetical books, they used not to trust in their own strength, but to didactical guides. And these books (generally works of clergymen or of principals) pre-

scribed to follow memory and catechetical methods, without any derogation¹¹.

Therefore, independently of the learned discipline, pupils did not but learn imitating adults' voices and words: political authority, religious messages and finally teachers' conduct. Self-reliance was far away.

3.3 *Illustrated books: social distinctions*

It is clear that the political and ideological project of that period implied that female pupils and those belonging to lower-class families had to learn and to reinforce inferior self-images. However, genre distinctions were common to countryside and town, poor and privileged girls: even if their concrete expected future was economically different, their social identity was similar

This aspect, pursued openly also through the teaching of Civic education and Good Manners essays¹², was expressed thanks to different instruments:

- Firstly, in Italian primary school co-education was not allowed by the Law. When and where, because of the poor number of boys and girls, the refusal of co-education was not possible, male, and female pupils should sit in different desks.

- Secondly, also in the school, during the recreation, boys used to imitate soldiers or play in masculine manner, whereas girls preferred to play, for example, "ring-a-ring-a-rose" or to imitate their mothers.

- Thirdly, the curriculum was different for girls, who, just from 1861, had to apply themselves to needlework: their social destiny, especially in the lower-class, was familiar management, sometimes beside a work in the factories or as a servant or as a seamstress.

- Fourthly, there are the tacit permissions in the conduct: there was more indulgence with boys than with girls, who ought to be always

¹¹ L. Bellatalla, *Sillabari e didattica nell'Ottocento: alcuni esempi nella produzione editoriale pisana*, in G. Genovesi (a cura di), *Leggere e scrivere tra Settecento e Ottocento*, Parma, Ricerche pedagogiche, 2001, pp.43-62.

¹² See L. Bellatalla, *I manuali di educazione civica nella scuola italiana*, in J. J. Pintassilgo (coord.), *Laicidade, religiões e educação na Europa do Sul no século XX*, Universidad de Lisboa, Instituto de Educação, 2013, pp. 207-220 (e-book), and L. Bellatalla, *La narrativa colorata. La letteratura popolare e l'educazione*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2015.

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obedient and respectful, silent, and tidy.

- Finally, the illustrations in the schoolbooks, in female newspapers and just in paintings reinforced social identity and social expectations.

4. *To conclude*

We have seen above how and how long students who belong to lower social groups tend to be treated in ways that lessens their self-reliance, independence, and autonomy. But we have seen also how all Italian pupils learnt indirectly the keywords of their social and ideological world. Surely the upper-class children were privileged; they can attend high school till the university and they had a social adult destiny economically richer and satisfying. Often they became governors or professors at the university.

Nevertheless, independently from the outcome, the keywords were the same: for a part they mean potential success; for a part, they mean resignation and social inferiority.

But all they learnt to become respectful of authority e animated by a patriotic sentiment, interested to social order more than to social progress.

Synthetically, I can conclude that unconsciously the hidden curriculum in the school system established after 1861 on the ground of that National culture that, with the complicity of IWW, allowed to Mussolini to conquer the government.

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