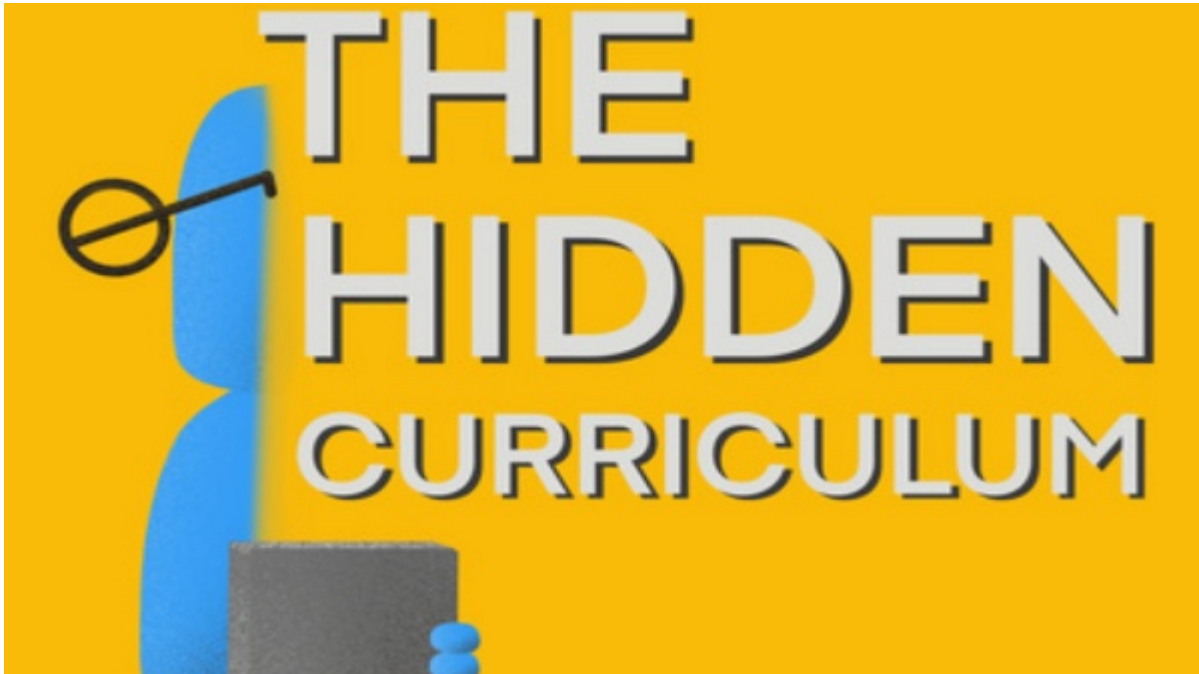


# The hidden curriculum of the registry

written by Don | September 15, 2021



By Don . . . The registry has a teaching function, as do the laws that relate to the registry. The obvious message is to follow the rules that the laws prescribe. But little concern is given to a second message, the sub-text, conveyed to registrants in these laws because it is “hidden” in the assumptions of the law as well as in the process of following the law. There are messages, indeed an entire curriculum, that is conveyed to registrants of which they—and often the writers of laws— seem to be unaware.

The concept of a hidden curriculum comes from research of children in working-class schools compared with upper-class schools. Researchers found that children in upper-class schools were given more time to answer questions asked in class, communicating the expectation that they would answer correctly if given enough time. The body language of the teacher communicated the same expectation. In contrast, the amount of time given to students in working-class schools was shorter, subtly conveying the message that they were not

expected to give the correct answer. The body language and tone of voice used by the teacher communicated that they were expected to take orders, not give them; they were to be followers, not leaders. If a person looked only at what was being taught, this hidden curriculum remained covert, but careful examination of how classes were taught revealed the assumptions behind the teaching (Gearing and Epstein, 1982).

While in therapy for the offense that resulted in being listed on the registry, I carefully tracked and recorded my thinking and actions involved in going to a nearby drugstore for a jar of mayonnaise. The account is filled with concern to spot any possible child so that they could be carefully avoided. The goal was complete avoidance of children, an idea regularly underscored by my therapist and probation officer. Every few feet I would scan the surrounding area for children and take an alternate route to avoid any possible contact. Even eye contact could be considered a violation of the law, I had been told. The scanning and avoidance continued, such as taking an alternate aisle when a child was seen in the aisle with mayonnaise, followed by waiting and checking to see if the child had moved on. Eventually I was able to make the purchase, but not without worry that someone in the checkout line next to me might have their child join the line.

I will admit that I was perhaps too careful, but I had heard repeatedly that jail could be the result of not being vigilant. The therapist once scolded me for not leaving a restaurant immediately when a family with two children sat at the next table. "All they have to do is accidentally touch you, and if an officer sees it and recognizes you, you can plan on a trip to the county jail." It may well be that the therapist exaggerated, but at that point in therapy, I took everything I was told quite literally. I knew I did not want to return to the correctional system!

But what was the hidden curriculum of the rule to avoid children at all cost? Examining the results of such rules

helps reveal what is being taught in a subtle manner. First, children must be "scanned" for and avoided constantly, for fear they might accidentally wave at you or say something to you. I had ignored children much of the time until I got into therapy, but now I learned they were dangerous and thus their presence must be monitored constantly. While done for a different purpose, this is of course the behavior of someone who solicits a child sexually. My actions and behavior were being subtly shaped into those of a pedophile actively seeking children.

I was not allowed to attend church. There were too many children there, I was told, and the possibility of accidental contact was too great. The therapist and probation officer worked with the pastor for me to have "chaperones" in church, observing me at least occasionally to be sure I did not get close to any children. There are two adult males in my church who have learned that I am potentially a reoffender, and their expectation now is that I will do so. This seemed absurd to me, since my original offense was not a contact offense. But the expectation of my harming a child is now in the minds of two leaders of the church and no doubt their spouses and other leaders in the church. I am expected to do something worse than my offense, which was looking at a computer screen.

The expectation influences perception. Anything that is deemed suspicious, such as a child entering the pew in which I am seated, is now a dangerous situation. As a result, I am instructed by the therapist and probation officer to move to a new row if this occurs. I must also move if a child sits directly in front of me or behind me, regardless of whether parents are present or not. This was for my own good, I was told, because anyone visiting could get the wrong impression. No doubt that was true, but particularly if the visitor was a police officer who knew my situation. Upon talking with the pastor, I decided to stop attending church.

It occurred to me that these rules were shaping me into taking

the role of a deviant. These rules were written for people who are different from the average person, different in a sexual manner. Because a person is forced to take a deviant perspective to follow a rule, he or she tends to think from that perspective. The hidden curriculum gradually shapes the person into someone she or he is not. Any self-doubt that may exist is repeatedly confirmed by such laws. The message is, "You are abnormal."

To pigeonhole people as perverse, and to influence them to act in an abnormal manner, is likely to create people who are in some ways abnormal and at the very least increases the likelihood of other problems.

As a society, we have created a nightmare for the many who will never reoffend and are not a threat to communities. Fortunately, many registrants refuse to let their status define who they are. Those who do succumb to the hidden messages do not always reoffend. They may commit suicide because they are convinced they lack worth and value. They may give up on a society that has rejected them and turn to criminal behavior in order to survive, a decision that supports the image they now hold of themselves. Interestingly, that behavior rarely involves any sexual component. They may survive for a while following this track, but when caught, they are now "recidivists" (at least as some count recidivism), and most everyone assumes they have reoffended sexually.

But the registrants I know stubbornly resist the labels and the hidden agendas of registry laws. They want to prove them wrong, because they are wrong. But such restrictions are in essence an additional sentence for registrants, forced on them after they have "served their time" and paid the prescribed penalties.

It may be that some who favor such harsh laws see something of themselves in those who break society's laws. They may, at

some unconscious level, see the shutting away of the “deviants” as a way of avoiding their own struggles with sexual attraction to children. It is easy to project deep fears about self upon others, and what group is more vulnerable to this than those who are on the registry?

For the most part, though, such harsh sexual offense laws are the product of sheer ignorance. There is a great deal of research that reveals the many misconceptions about registrants. Perhaps one day that work will receive the recognition it deserves. Perhaps someday there be justice for those on the registry. And perhaps our grandchildren, or their children, will ask us how it was that people could assume such terrible things about others without really knowing them. What will we tell them?

In the meantime, we who are registrants who are not reoffending must reject the “sex offender” label and status. We are not sex offenders if we have changed. It is an identity that must be categorically rejected. It is true that at some point in the past we have offended. But that is what we did, not who we are. It is the past, not the present. We have learned to be better, even if society fails to recognize that fact. And thus we must—when possible—become educators who, by the way we live our lives, reveal the lies hidden in the registry laws.

We must stop letting the worst of the past define who we are in the present. We choose life by being the best people we can be, by being trustworthy neighbors and friends who do not fit the stereotypes that others have designed for us. We must be who we were born to be, not what laws imply that we are. We are worthwhile. We are valuable. We do not deserve injustice from unfair laws and the pre-judgements of people. We deserve justice. All of us. Every one of us.

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Gearing, F. and Epstein, P. "Learning to Wait," Spindler, G. Doing the Ethnography of Schooling: Educational Anthropology in Action, New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982.