

## Articles

# Missionary Use of the Gospel as Hidden Curriculum

Andrew R. Jones

*Author's Note: For reasons of security and sensitivity, the following article omits names, places, dates, and other identifying details.*

**Abstract:** Christ instructs His disciples to make disciples of all nations, but in today's world some nations refuse missionary activity of any kind. Through anonymous interviews with missionaries in countries which do not openly welcome missionaries, Andrew R. Jones highlights the tension between following Christ's commission and living within the legal parameters of such a government. This article compares such missionary activity to the educational concept of "hidden curriculum," showcasing how missionaries in these contexts are able to share the Gospel despite the challenges and limits of their situations.

Is lying permissible for the sake of the Gospel? Missionaries are facing this question with increasing frequency in many international contexts. I spoke with a group of missionaries who recently served in a location where the term "missionary" was unusable. The nationals in said location thought of missionaries as spies sent to take over their country. Anyone bearing the title "missionary" was entirely distrusted.

Despite this hurdle, several teacher-missionaries accepted positions in language schools to teach English. However, other personnel in these schools did not know that these teachers were simultaneously serving as missionaries. There was no communication about the mission organization serving as a backing agency whose primary purpose was to share the Gospel message of Jesus Christ.

It was a complex and compromising position. The teacher-missionaries' official purpose was to build relationships with their students and seek opportunities to share the Gospel with them both inside and outside of the classroom. It involved a fair

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amount of bending the truth, and a fair amount of blatant lying. For many, this approach presented a moral dilemma.

Since the goal was to share the Gospel, many of these teacher-missionaries felt compelled to share the Gospel as often as possible, but doing this too overtly could have resulted in expulsion from the country. It was common for missionaries to report a reluctance to share the Gospel inside the classroom in a direct way. The Gospel was used as a sort of “hidden curriculum.” Hidden curriculum is an education term referring to what the teachers and school administrators hope students will learn through the day-to-day experience of simply *being* at the school.

Shane Martin phrased it this way: “The hidden curriculum consists of the values, beliefs and messages we give our students in the informal, non-instructional areas that permeate the entire school culture.”<sup>1</sup> For Martin’s school, one goal was the promotion of diversity. Their hidden curriculum for this goal included hiring a diverse faculty, focusing on a hospitable and welcoming environment, and finding ways to incorporate students’ diverse experiences into the classroom. In Martin’s case, the agenda of a hidden curriculum did not need to be kept secret. It was implemented as a school-wide, systematic strategy. The goal was hidden in that it came through informal, non-instructional means, but it was not kept secret. The promotion of diversity is a goal which does not need to be concealed.

In some contexts, the promotion of the Gospel needs to remain concealed. The group of teacher-missionaries I spoke with did not have such a school-wide system at their disposal. They wanted the Gospel to permeate their classrooms, but they had to keep their intent hidden on multiple levels. The Gospel had to remain hidden, coming through informal, non-instructional methods; moreover, even these informal, non-instructional methods had to be concealed from the school administrations with whom they were working.

The Department of Education in this location had its own hidden curriculum, which conflicted with the goals of the teacher-missionaries. The Department of Education fostered a strong sense of patriotism and conformity. In this context, becoming a Christian meant entering into a small minority and risking the all but certain loss of employment, family, and friends. Conversion was not common. It was culturally unacceptable and the Department of Education’s hidden curriculum reinforced this element of the culture. Despite the culture’s intolerance of conversion, Christian identity was acceptable so long as Christians were from a country where Christianity was the norm. Each teacher-missionary I spoke with was asked on numerous occasions: “Are you a Christian?” Students generally thought all Americans were Christians, rich, and lived like celebrities. The teacher-missionaries helped clarify that they were American and Christian, but they were not rich and lived in modest apartments on modest salaries. It was acceptable and expected to be an American and a Christian, but as stated above, the word “missionary” carried a weight of distrust.

In working through the tension of being teacher-missionaries, but not being able to admit this openly, the group found that certain practices were not possible (or at the very least dangerous), but there were other strategies which worked rather well.

In describing school culture, Stephen Stolp and Stuart C. Smith point out three levels of school culture.<sup>2</sup> The first and most visible level is “tangible artifacts.” In Christian schools, these may include a cross or other artwork depicting biblical scenes.

The second level is “values and beliefs.” If a literature professor’s favorite author is Jane Austen, he or she will likely assign some of Austen’s books for every course. The professor does not have to state this value and may not even be aware of the value being showcased. The value is not evident in one course, but it becomes more noticeable over a longer period of time.

The third level of school culture is the “underlying assumptions.” This is the most hidden of the three levels. These underlying assumptions often exist in policies and practices that have been in place for many years and are now taken for granted. They can be seen in the dress code or the length of class periods.<sup>3</sup>

The teacher-missionaries could not adjust the school-wide culture; they could only work individually. The first level—tangible artifacts—could not be adjusted to their preferences. Wearing jewelry, such as a cross, was acceptable, but they could not remove any of the artifacts already in the room serving the hidden curriculum of the Department of Education. Classrooms were communal and used by multiple teachers, so designing classrooms with artwork and other artifacts was also out of the question.

The second level of values and beliefs proved more fruitful. An effective strategy for sharing the Gospel was raising student curiosity with the hope of getting them to ask questions which would lead to further conversations about faith. Some topics were more suited for this than others.

Each teacher-missionary I interviewed mentioned “holidays” as one of the most effective topics for bringing forward the hidden curriculum of the Gospel. Working on Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter was not fun, but it afforded opportunities to share the practices and beliefs behind these holidays and share the Gospel in a non-evasive way, presenting the holidays as facts about Christians. A typical conversation might be as follows:

*Teacher: Christians celebrate Easter because they believe Jesus was killed and rose from the dead three days later, on Easter Sunday.*

*Student: Are you a Christian?*

*Teacher: Yes, I am.*

*Student: So why did Jesus have to die if He was just going to come back to life again?*

*Teacher: Jesus died and was raised to forgive the sins of the world.*<sup>4</sup>

One teacher shared an experience from teaching on Easter Sunday. The students were learning the passive voice. Several examples seemed fitting. Jesus was betrayed. Jesus was denied. Jesus was beaten. Jesus was crucified. Jesus was raised. The students then had to name the agent in each passive sentence, e.g., Jesus was betrayed *by Judas*. Jesus was denied *by Peter*. This practice allowed the teacher-missionary to put forward the narrative of Holy Week through the lens of the passive voice.

Another effective topic was traditions such as weddings and funerals. One teacher-missionary told her classes about her sister's upcoming wedding. The students were so curious about the service that they asked to see the order of service. The teacher-missionary brought in *Lutheran Service Book*, and they read through the marriage rite together, learning vocabulary and hearing God's Word through the rite.

The above stories provide specific examples of bringing the Gospel forward through values and beliefs. However, much of the hidden curriculum for teacher-missionaries in such contexts exists in their own underlying assumptions. These teacher-missionaries strove to be trustworthy teachers, people who help students through problems. It was evident that these teacher-missionaries cared for their students more than other teachers in their respective schools. Pairing this compassionate attitude with the known fact of their being Christians was the most basic function of the hidden curriculum. They shared the Gospel explicitly when it was appropriate and showcased the effects of the Gospel implicitly at every possible opportunity. The Gospel had transformed these teacher-missionaries into the compassionate people who cared so deeply for their students.

These teachers were technically "missionaries" in that they were sent by a mission organization, but it seems to me that they were simply living out their vocations. They were English teachers and Christians. They fulfilled their vocation as teachers by being the best teachers they could be, caring about their students and preparing engaging lessons. They fulfilled their vocation as Christians by sharing the hope that was in them when an appropriate topic arose.

Further development of hidden curriculum for missionary use might better lend itself to a term such as "unspoken curriculum." The term "hidden" may carry baggage unfitting to missionary service, while "unspoken" does not carry such a nuance.

As we live in an increasingly un-churched and de-churched context, we can learn a few lessons from these teacher-missionaries. Establishing yourself as a trustworthy employee, neighbor, boss, and customer is essential to today's relational world. Being interested in other people's lives, cultures, and traditions is fundamental to growing in fellowship. Perhaps the next time you're in the grocery store you can comment on all the Christmas decorations with a fellow customer. A

helpful question in such a dialogue might be, “How do you celebrate Christmas?” Think about how you would answer such a question. Does it bring to mind stories from your childhood? Can you hear the music in your memory? Can you taste the food?

Imagine having such conversations with your hairdressers and bank tellers, your co-workers and cashiers. Imagine learning their stories and sharing yours. If your hairdresser trusts you with his or her story, and there is a plot twist in that story, they may very well share that plot twist with you. They may share about a death in the family, a struggle with children, or any number of things. The Gospel has transformed you, just as it has transformed those teacher-missionaries. Your care for your neighbor can shine through as you learn their stories.

Getting people to share their stories is a Gospel handle that can allow us to share our story. We are a part of a bigger story. Our story points to the grander story of salvation in Jesus Christ.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Shane P. Martin, *Catholic Diversity for Catholic Schools: Challenges and Opportunities for Catholic Educators* (Washington, DC: National Catholic Education Association, 1996), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Stolp and Stuart C. Smith, *Transforming School Culture: Stories, Symbols, Values & the Leader’s Role* (Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse, 1995), 35–40.

<sup>3</sup> For more on levels of school culture, see also Kent D. Peterson and Terrence E. Deal, *The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002). Peterson and Deal lay out four levels of school culture similar to Stolp and Smith. They are: visions and values; ritual and ceremony; history and stories; architecture, artifacts, and symbols.

<sup>4</sup> This is an oversimplified conversation, but similar conversations were commonly reported.