

Chapter 1: The Inner Curriculum



“Science and education, being too exclusively abstract, verbal, and bookish, don’t have enough place for raw, concrete, esthetic experience, especially of the subjective happening inside oneself” (Maslow, 1968, P. 229).

When our educational systems become preoccupied with measurement, test taking, and a positivistic orientation, we risk ignoring students’ inner dimensions. Educating the whole person means restoring balance between inner and outer lives, which John Miller (2000) calls soulful learning. This chapter defines the inner curriculum and describes its qualities.

DEFINING THE INNER CURRICULUM

The inner curriculum is a school’s plan for addressing the inner life of its students. It is a series of experiences and activities that help students examine their emotions, imagination, intuition, ideals, values, and sense of spirituality. (Spirituality is defined in this book in both a sacred and secular sense.) The inner curriculum can be inserted into any curriculum that is currently in place and is comprised of four elements.

1. Intrapersonal. The intrapersonal element involves one’s emotions, intuition, and spirituality. In dealing with emotions, students must identify feelings and then connect them to external events or situations. Intuition teaches students how to use their general impressions or sense of knowing separate from logic and emotion. Spirituality here is defined as simply honoring the inner. Here one looks for symbols, images, and impressions and then assigns meaning. Meditation, guided imagery, power writing, and mythology are often used with this intrapersonal element.

2. Expressing the Intrapersonal. With this element, students give expression to what is discovered in the intrapersonal element above. The arts are often incorporated: Music, dance, visual art, drama, poetry, and creative writing can all be used as separate curricular elements or used across the curriculum. Also, personal metaphors, journal writing, and small group discussions in which students are engaged in honest dialogue can also be used to express intrapersonal elements.

3. Interpersonal. This element involves understanding one’s self in the context of a group, culture, or social setting. Activities include cooperative group activities, values clarification, moral dilemmas, and an aesthetic response to literature.

4. The Human Condition. With this element, students seek to know themselves in the context of humanity. The goal is to begin to understand what it is to be human and to find similarities over time and across cultures. Comparisons using mythology, literature, and history as well as newspapers and current events can be incorporated

ACTIVITIES IN THE INNER CURRICULUM

The activities in the inner curriculum are designed to lead to a better understanding of oneself, which in turn makes it less likely that the conscious mind will be ruled by unconscious forces (Bettleheim, 1984). By bringing unconscious images, wants, and feelings to consciousness, one is then free to act upon them.

Neglecting the inner, subjective world of the psyche increases the likelihood that students will experience meaninglessness, psychic fragmentation, or some form of affect disorder (Jung, 1933; Smith, 1990; Sylwester, 2000).

The inner curriculum need not replace a curriculum already in place. Like a small glove inside a larger one, it can augment and enhance those things a teacher is already doing. Inner curriculum activities should have some or all of the following eight characteristics:

1. They are open ended. If the activity is truly part of the inner curriculum, students are not expected to come to a predetermined conclusion or create a standardized product. Like life, there is no set answer. Students are allowed and even encouraged to come to their own conclusions. In creating or responding, they can take the idea as far as they want or, in turn, respond as minimally as they feel necessary. For example, in an activity from the inner curriculum, you would not find a teacher saying to a student, “This story is very short. Why don’t you go back and add some more description?”

2. They are meaningful. Assignments and activities are not created to keep students busy, to have them demonstrate their knowing, or to get a nice dispersion of scores. Rather, activities are designed to increase understanding or to move students forward. Students are able to connect with the activity on a personal level. Homework is seen not as a measuring device, but as practice of things that have already been learned in class (Brophy, 1986). After reading a chapter in a social studies text, the regular curriculum might have students do a worksheet to reinforce ideas or to gauge their comprehension. In the inner curriculum the teacher would say, “Find an idea that you find interesting. Describe it using words, pictures, or some other form; then tell us how it might touch your life.”

3. They connect with students’ lives. These activities try to make connections with students’ inner or outer lives. For example, after reading a story, students might be asked to describe similar feelings, events, characters, or situations from their own lives. In a science lesson, students might be directed to see how a concept touches their lives or to take an imaginary trip somewhere and describe what they see, feel, and hear.

4. They promote a greater understanding of self. One of the goals of the inner curriculum is to examine those parts of ourselves that have been ignored. This is done to help us begin to recognize why we think and feel as we do. In this way we can eventually free our unconscious forces.

5. They promote a greater understanding of others. When students are able to look beyond surface differences, they are able to see the great commonality in the human experience, one that transcends time, geography, race, ethnicity, society, status, and religion. This helps them to connect with others in a more meaningful way with others.

6. They allow students to share their ideas with others. Here students are thinking, creating, and doing not just for the teacher, but also for a variety of audiences. Dramas are created and performed in other classrooms. Writing projects are shared and eventually turned into class books. Students are asked to respond to the ideas of others. You see cooperative learning and students talking with other students. Students are encouraged to turn to a neighbor to get help or to share an idea.

7. They recognize multiple ways to demonstrate knowing. In traditional curriculums, knowledge is demonstrated by taking a test or writing a report. Activities in the spiritual curriculum realize that people are able to express their knowledge and understand in a variety of ways. For example, students may create dramas demonstrating important concepts, use art or photography, give a speech, use dance or creative movement, use music, dress up as a character and recreate important events, or create a video. Imagine important concepts in a science class represented with sculpture or visual art, set to music, and presented to other students in a video or slide presentation.

8. They recognize and attend to the spiritual element in each child. As described above, spirituality in the inner curriculum is completely separate from organized religion. It can be viewed two ways: First, it can be seen in a purely secular sense as an accumulation of one’s ideals, values, and lofty aspirations. It is that higher part of self, super ego, or what I call super-consciousness that is accessed through one’s intuitive sense. Second, spirituality can be seen in the sacred sense as the part of oneself that is connected to something beyond

self that is of numinous origin. Regardless of the view, spirituality opens one up to a sense of the transcendent or the experience beyond the experience.

ACADEMICS VERSUS SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Some of the proponents of the back-to-basics movement in education want to get rid of all activities related to self-esteem, personal growth, emotional discovery, or identity issues, saying that these sorts of things take away from a school's educational purpose. The reasoning is that schools are meant to educate people. I could spend the next several pages of this text describing what education really means (there is no knowledge apart from knowledge of self), and what I think the true purpose of our schools ought to be (to help each human realize his or her fullest potential physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually). I will spare you this. Instead, I want to demonstrate that the inner curriculum is not an either/or proposition. Students can learn in the traditional sense of acquiring a designated body of knowledge and a set of skills, and at the same time, they can begin to understand themselves and others and learn what it means to be a human being as they engage in the process of making personal connections to topics, skills, and other human beings. Indeed, the latter enhances the former to a great degree. That is, students learn more when there is a meaningful connection to what is to be learned.

IMPLEMENTING THE INNER CURRICULUM

The chapters that follow contain a variety of activities that can be used in any K-12 classroom to develop students' interpersonal, intrapersonal, and emotional intelligence. Four points to consider before moving on: First, all activities are meant to be adapted to your particular teaching style or situation. Like students, teachers are not standardized products. We all have varying strengths and interests. I recommend that you choose only those activities that interest you. Also, by adapting and adopting, these activities can be used in varying forms with students from kindergarten through graduate school.

Second, I reiterate that these are not meant to become a separate curriculum; rather, they are meant to enhance those curriculums already in place. Thus said, they can be used to develop reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. They can also be used to enhance learning in any subject area. In this current climate of tight budgets, some say that schools do not have room for anything other than "education". I will not get into the purpose of schools and a definition of education. Suffice to say, inner curriculum activities enhance learning by making personal connections to students' lives. Thus, students learn more and learn more deeply.

Third, you must be sensitive in implementing inner curriculum activities. You cannot expect students to share without first building a sense of trust and community. The older the student, the more time it takes. To begin to build trust and community, a teacher should be willing to share. If you want students to identify and express intimate thoughts or emotions, a teacher must lead by example. This is usually done by first describing a thought or idea that you want students to share. This builds trust and breaks down some of the barriers between student and teacher. I have found that students love to hear teachers' observations, memories, and experiences.

You should lay down some ground rules about the level of disclosure, listening respectfully, allowing all to speak, and honoring what others say (see Chapters 3 and 8). Always invite but never force students to share or demand that they write more than they are comfortable. An interrogation destroys trust and community. It also is best to begin by having students share in pairs or groups of three. As trust is developed, the groups can become bigger.

Finally, these activities often deal with important emotional, social, and life issues and as such, they can sometimes identify students who have serious problems. However, these activities are not meant to be a cure. While students often find support, gain insight, or discover solutions, serious problems should *always* be referred to mental health or community experts.

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