

The Experience of Hidden Curriculum on Selecting a Supervisor from the Perspective of Students

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Abstract: Hidden curriculum is a new topic presented by the experts of curriculum during the recent years. In this study, the criteria for selecting a supervisor were studied through the experiences gained by the graduates of PhD. courses. This research is a qualitative and a phenomenological study. In this study, all participants were graduated PhD students. The research tools include semi-structured interviews and a sampling method of usual and ordinary cases; and for data analysis, subject Open Coding and Selective Coding (optional) were used. This paper was the result of interviews with 54 Ph.D. students from medical and non-medical universities and also State and Azad Universities. Moreover, the hidden experiences of PhD. students regarding the selection of a supervisor were studied. In this study, 12 main categories were extracted from 123 common factors found in our investigation that include: behavioral and ethical characteristics, executive positions, scientific positions, being well-known or famous, access to supervisors, having skill and mastery in research and statistics, having specialty and expertise in a specific field, limitations and constraints, senior students, gender, supportive ability of supervisors and the futurism or anticipating the future. Results showed that the hidden factors such as ethical and behavioral characteristics of supervisors or professors, their academic and scientific ranks, governed laws on the universities, rules and regulations of the universities, informal networks, and the possible supports and limitations can affect the selection of students (regarding the selection of a supervisor). Also, some of the guidelines and regulations issued by ministries might be effective. Many of these regulations are not implemented and therefore require more profound thinking on this subject.

Keywords: Hidden Curriculum, Supervisor, Student's Experience

1. Introduction

Hidden curriculum is a relatively new topic which was presented by the related experts during the recent years. According to Eisner(1995), schools are teaching three lesson-plans simultaneously including explicit curriculum (formal), hidden curriculum (implicit) and ineffective or invalid curriculum. This issue is against the current belief on the curriculum of schools which is presented as a one-dimensional phenomenon and considers the schools as a place like kindergarten in order to execute explicit curriculums.

Mehrmohammadi (2008) believed that hidden curriculum is nothing except taking steps into deep-thinking toward teaching and training flows and preventing simple-thinking. Also, he believed that learning and teaching the invalid and hidden curriculum means that both affect the students in order to form and shape their experiences and their presence in the learning and teaching system. Trying to present the learning results or experiences of students without considering these two concepts, or these two curriculums along with a formal one, is an incomplete and ineffective attempt and never presents this field completely.

In most cases, the effect of hidden curriculum is more than the formal curriculum as some individuals do not observe these principles while learning the related principles and norms. Selecting a supervisor during the researching process and its effect on the referential valuation of subjects and titles of thesis and also its place in the curriculum of learning centers is one of the important issues in the curriculum of universities (Yarmohammadian, 2007).

Occasionally, PhD. students consider some criteria for choosing the professors, which potentially affect their research course. Highlighting the characteristics of some professors by PhD. students give an especial value to this course and increases its significance. The presented paper was done by considering this presumption that the universities are centers of science and most scientific studies require guidelines; and also, the students make hard efforts to select a supervisor though different ways.

For this reason, this paper tries to determine the effective hidden factors on selecting a supervisor during the research course. According to Benson and Snider, there are no high schools and kindergarten in which the hidden curriculum had been imposed on the students and the learning boards, but in fact, it affects the whole process of education (Maleki, 2012).

Ghourchin (2010) allocated the hidden curriculum to teaching the informal texts of value systems, norms and perceptions, the non-academic beliefs and the informal

aspects of High Educational Centers which result in a training system toward the governed philosophy, structure and texture of a society.

In other words, the hidden curriculum refers to a set of learning(s) in High Education System which resulted in a governed philosophy in the educational environment (universities and the institutes of higher education) without informing the members of scientific board and the students. The hidden curriculum includes implicit, informal and intangible teaching of values' system, norms, beliefs and the informal aspects of universities and high educational centers which affect the training system and the society texture. The hidden curriculum basically is not approved by the formal experts of schools but it can serve as an effective method to the formal and executive curriculum (Fathivajargah, 2007).

In any case, there are various hidden factors within a research course which affect the values and aims of this course and also decrease the validity of PhD. degree and the students' success in this course such as in selecting the supervisor. Therefore, in this paper the experiences of PhD. graduate students from selecting the supervisor were studied and also the effective hidden factors in this domain were examined.

Since there are various factors which are not related to the formal curriculum and the experts of education ignore them (do not consider them), but these factors affect the thoughts, emotions and the behavior of learners and also they are mostly effective on the explicit curriculum in most cases. Therefore, the hidden curriculum determines an extent which is the basis of value and self-confidence of participants significantly and this hidden curriculum affects the selection of supervisor more than the formal one.

Certainly, these kinds of hidden curriculums considerably affect the whole process of the research course. And also, ignoring the negative effects of hidden curriculum makes the accomplishment of research course aims hard and difficult. Although the conditions of selecting the supervisor within the explicit curriculum (pre-designed curriculum) of universities were presented in brief but there are effective hidden factors in order to select a supervisor which affect the research course.

In a study by Tonkaboni (2015), she found that a high percentage of students believed in the scientific weaknesses of some of the teachers and its first rank among other hidden learning shows the effects that the professor teaching has on students.

Therefore, the planners and experts must consider the hidden curriculum in all educational and research fields within PhD. courses. The writer of this paper, by reading the books and journals related to the training and learning (education) area,

in particular educational planning, as well as searching the internet and Persian information banks such as Scientific Information Bank of Jahad Daneshgahi, Noor Journals Base and IRANDOC website, SID, etc. did not find any research named studying the effective hidden factors on selecting the supervisor in the research course, but other studies related to this topic were found.

In a study by Safaeemovahed and Attaran (2013), they found the especial dynamics of supervisor - student relationships in doing the research projects and also investigate the incorrect norms that the students consider them when selecting their supervisor. Based on the obtained results from an interview with 6 M.A. students of Planning Curriculum who were in the stage of selecting a supervisor, the related norms (for selecting a supervisor) were classified into six groups: behavior and characteristics of the professors, academic and non-academic norms, possible support, and limitations. The results showed that the students will access to these norms through observing the performance of professors in class and defense sessions and also the informal network such as the former students.

In another study by Attaran, Zein Abadi and Tulaby (2009) "relationships between supervisor and students toward PhD. thesis", they have found that more than 50% of PhD. learners were unhappy with their supervisors and on the other hand, if the level of satisfaction from (happiness with) supervisors increases, the students' relationship with their supervisors becomes more satisfactory; it must be mentioned that there is a positive relationship between the quality and efficiency of thesis with the students' satisfaction regarding their relationship with their supervisors.

This paper was done by an integration of two methods i.e. qualitative and quantitative methods. At first, by studying the related literature and interviews with the supervisors or professors who had experiences in completing thesis and also interviews with PhD. students, 20 indices or indicators as the criteria of a desirable relationship between supervisors and students were extracted, the most important ones are: easy access of students to the supervisors, the assistance of supervisors in order to compile and edit the previous literature and the other parts (Attaran et al., 2009).

The aim of another paper by Fathivajargah, Arefi and Jalilinia (2009) was to recognize and study the hidden curriculum in M.A. theses in Shahid Beheshti University. Based on the definition of Portly (1993) toward hidden curriculum, four main dimensions were defined in order to shape and design the hidden curriculum of thesis. They are presented in the following:

- Hidden curriculum as the informal expectation except expected plans in the thesis;
- Hidden curriculum resulted from the unintended learning(s);
- Hidden curriculum resulted from thesis structure; and
- Hidden curriculum by students

The present qualitative paper was done using an ethnography method and it was conducted on 20 students (in M.A. degree) in three groups of (A): Human Science, (B): Engineering and Technical Sciences and (C): Basic Sciences by the researcher. The related findings which were obtained by using various qualitative tools such as autobiography, observation, image or pictures, semi-structured interviews and the content analysis done by the researcher indicate that the students gained negative and positive experiences during the time of writing thesis. (Fathivajargah, 2009)

Stevenson & Evans (2009) reviewed the related studies of the relationship between students and supervisors during 1990-2009 and found that the quality of experiences resulted from these relationships was affected by these factors: 1- the clarity of expectations and 2- the level of support of supervisors from their students.

Vilkinas (2008) in a study on 25 supervisors in Ireland has found that the supervisors use 6 styles in guiding the students:

- Developer (participating the student in making decisions toward their thesis);
- Deliverer (determining and delivering the expected results to the students);
- Monitor (continuous monitoring on the performance of students through reviewing their work);
- Broker (establishing the communicative network between students and the other social sources);
- Innovator (creative ideas about thesis);
- Integrator (taking the desirable response toward the created situations in guiding the thesis).

Bradbury et al. (2007) studied the communicative process between students and supervisors by using critical discourse analysis. Based on his viewpoint, the evolution process was associated with features such as responsibility and

independence; also the center of control and relationships is gradually being changed from supervisors toward the students. He defined this gradual independency as “weaning the babies.

The related study from the hidden curriculum in higher education was done by Margolis et al., in 2001 in which the factors such as educational counseling, relationships of supervisors and students and the role of professional learning(s) in re-producing the social inequalities were studied. One of the most important parts of this project was to study the relationship between supervisors and students which was conducted by Sandra Acker, who extensively studied the hidden curriculum within the relationships of supervisors and students in USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The results show that these relationships are under the effect of factors such as the culture of major, the culture of educational group, the rules for accepting students, gender and the unequal position of supervisor and students in the organizational hierarchy of universities (Margolis, Eric et al., 2001).

Tawnsend (1996) in a case study studied the structural elements which result into a hidden curriculum in the High Education, and pointed out that elements such as social structure of a class, the authority of supervisors, the governed rules on the relationships between supervisors and students and also the structural obstacles within universities are playing a role in the formation of hidden curriculum in the Higher Education. Based on his viewpoint, if the support networks and their rules do not exist in the universities for selecting the supervisors and the manner of their relationships with the students, therefore, the rule of “Survival of the Fittest” will be governed and everyone tries to guarantee his / her position by using the availabilities.

2. Methods and Materials

This paper was done during the academic year 2011-2012. In this paper, all universities of Iran which have access to the acceptance conditions of PhD. students and the students who have passed their research course in PhD. degree were interviewed. In this paper all students of state and non-state (Azad) universities were participated and all participants were graduates of PhD. degree.

This paper is a qualitative study and 54 individuals were interviewed. Of 54 participants in this study, 35, 15 and 4 individuals were from the state universities of Science and Technology Ministry, Medical Sciences Universities and Islamic Azad Universities of Iran in different educational majors, respectively. The researcher interviewed with the participants directly and in-depth for 8 months, and

to complete the interviews for studying their experiences research course, telephone and e-mails were used during the research course.

The sampling was based on purposeful sampling selected as a logical sampling method of phenomenological studies. In this paper, Typical Case Sampling (one of the kinds of purposeful sampling) was used. The instrument was semi-structured interview. The extracted findings and information were analyzed through classifying the interviews, making prominent the main cases/ points, organizing the documents, interviews, and interpreting the information. In data analysis, coding method was used; it means after doing the interviews with the informants (as these interviews were recorded by the recording system) and transcribing them, Open Coding (such as reading the lines based on data lines, extracting the main sentences and concepts, forming the principle categories) and Axial Coding (classifying data, determining the sub-classes, forming the final classes) were done.

In order to examine the validity of research instruments, the researcher sent the guideline form of interview to 5 professional professors during the research course and asked their idea about the selected questions in this form, after receiving their feedback and revising some questions, the researcher used this form to complete the interview. To assure the validity of data and results, the following measures were done.

In order to make sure about the validity of coding(s) and the named categories by the researcher, they were sent to two researchers for review, and then by using the viewpoints of these two researchers, the final categories were formed. These final categories were presented to the interviewees and their ideas were asked. Their responses indicated that these categories and the extracted results are relatively accurate reflections of their viewpoints. Also in this paper, in order to measure the reliability of this study, the method of Kirk & Miller as the Noting Rules was used.

3. Results

One of the main problems of students is to select their supervisor during their research course. This issue is one of the serious problems for PhD. students as the researchers must consider and pay attention to their implications in spite of the above mentioned points in the instructions and the regulation of universities.

Based on several studies and the results obtained from interviews with 54 graduate students in this paper, 12 secondary themes were found as the effective hidden factors on selecting the supervisors, which are classified into other subgroups:

3.1 Ethical and Behavioral Characteristics

The ethical and behavioral characteristics of professors were one the most important criteria that the interviewees considered for selecting their supervisor. The interviewees will access to these characteristics within different situations such as classes, university campuses, and professors' offices and also the situations outside the universities. Within these situations, the professors themselves will show certain behaviors to different individuals among their students. Based on the interviews in this paper, it is possible to determine the behavioral characteristics through three ways as:

- How to behave with the colleagues;
- How to behave with the students and
- How to behave with the individuals outside the university

3.2 Executive Position

In some interviews, the interviewees selected their supervisors due to his/her major executive position in the university. They believed that by selecting this person (such as the head of university and faculty) as their supervisors, they will find access to an indirect power and nobody will reject their views and if a fault is observed in their works, all of the instructors and professors will ignore it and they will be more cautious when giving a mark to these students.

The interviewee named H.A. stated that: I preferred, at first, to select a supervisor who had a major position in the university because the experience of my M.A. course proved this issue for me and due to its significance, I successfully passed my thesis course. [Interviewee no.: 23].

3.3 Scientific Position

In all interviews, it became clear that all interviewees paid more attention to the scientific position of their supervisors in their PhD. course as they used any situation in order to select a supervisor who had a high scientific degree and possessed more articles, books, etc. Certainly, in the universities of Iran, the number of these supervisors is less and it is not possible for all PhD. students who want to pass this stage of their education completely.

Based on the view of S.Z. about his/her supervisor: ... in our university, there was only a supervisor who received his/her professor position and others were assistant professors and they did not have access to an international degree; for this reason,

this professor can only accept the thesis of one PhD. student and the other students cannot ...[Interviewee no.: 43].

3.4 Being Famous and Well-Known

Based on the interviews, it became clear and obvious that most PhD. students prefer to select a supervisor who is a well-known professor and when someone asked them who is your supervisor, they showed the cover of their thesis and replied that Professor ... proudly. Some students are proud of a professor who is well-known and they could not hide their happiness.

In this case, H.M. 'graduate of educational management' said: ... the fame and credit of a supervisor was so important for me, [...] when someone asked me who your supervisor is, I replied Professor X, loudly and proudly. I liked to hear the feeling of others to this issue or see his / her name in my article and the other things [Interviewee no.: 50].

3.5 Access to the Supervisor

All PhD. students request their supervisors to help them in completing their thesis in spite of their problems and they (PhD. students) want to have access to them (supervisors) easily until they can solve their problems. Based on the related interviews, it became clear that PhD. students are in contact with their supervisors in three ways: e-mail, phones and face to face interaction. M.Sh. (interviewee of general psychology) stated that: ... when I required the assistance of my supervisors, it was possible for me to have a meeting with him/her and nothing was useful for me except having a face to face contact, because I think he/she reads my work accurately and also I can observe my work, my problems, ... carefully. [Interviewee no.: 48].

The other PhD. graduate in industry engineering from [X] university stated that: ... issues such as studies outside country, internal and foreign conferences or seminars of my supervisor were not useful for me because accessing to him / her was not possible for me. [Interviewee no.: 9].

3.6 Proficiency in Research and Statistics

Based on the related interviews, it became clear that each PhD. student prefers to select a supervisor who has proficiency in the study, research and statistics and also can help in different fields of study. A.S. a graduate in philosophy from [X] university stated that: ... [Oh] my supervisor did not have enough information

about the method of my study and for this reason, I asked other ones in order to help me ... [Interviewee no.: 41].

3.7 Skill in an Especial Scientific Field

Having skill and knowledge in an especial field is the other factor mentioned and considered by some PhD. interviewees in order to select a supervisor. Sometimes, a student has an interest in an especial field but all professors do not have any knowledge about it or they did not do any such study or this is not their educational major, therefore these students must select someone who has information about this topic as their supervisor.

In this field, one of the interviewees who was a pediatrics student stated that: [...] I looked for a supervisor who has information about a rare disease among children, although there are prominent professors in our faculty, they did not do any scientific study about this disease; due to this reason, I decided to ask the other professor named B.A., who worked in field of rare diseases in children, to cooperate with me and guide me in completing this work ... [interviewee no.: 2].

3.8 Limitations in Selecting a Supervisor

Based on the obtained data from these interviews, their limitations in selecting a supervisor were grouped into three categories as:

- The direct force of educational group and faculty,
- The indirect force of educational group and faculty,
- The force and persistence of faculty's professors.

*** The Direct Force of Educational Group and Faculty**

In some cases, the faculties inhibit the students from selecting a supervisor directly; hence, the faculty of their educational group imposes an especial supervisor; it means that they deprive the students from this right (to select the supervisor).

An interviewee who was graduated in Electric Engineering (in PhD. degree) stated that: [...] selecting the supervisor during our educational course was same as this way... the student was being invited to an interview after passing the written test, then, based on his/her interest to the intended subject of the professor and also the interest of professor to his/her acceptance, the name of student was registered as a person who got accepted, so the supervisor was being chosen from the beginning of

PhD. course based on the view of university. ... We did not have any right in this regard. [Interviewee no.: 21].

*** The Indirect Force of Educational Group and Faculty**

Based on the views of some interviewees, the force and imposition of universities or faculties on the students is indirect; which means that occasionally, the students are being put in some situations as they are deprived from their freedom to select their supervisors and finally they must accept the viewpoint of educational group and faculty.

An interviewee named F.Z. said: ... [I] know why they did not accept my thesis, [it was my supervisor who was not from our faculty and university] ... I decided to select my supervisor someone who is in our city since my university was far away of my city but the university rejected this view [although he was a well-known professor] and asked me to change the title of my thesis; ... it was clear that the main reason was not the title of my thesis but my supervisor. [Interviewee no.: 37].

*** The Force and Persistence of Faculty Professors**

Based on the view of some interviewees, sometime the students are put in some situations that they have to select their supervisor by force; for example, the students are being forced to select someone as a supervisor without any interest to him or her because they are friends with each other, they know each other or he (she) was his (her) supervisor during the M.A. course and sometimes, the professors ask their students to select them as their supervisors due to some reason such as giving them best marks.

In this case, an interviewee stated that; [...] when I spoke with him (the supervisor) about my proposal, it resulted into an ending that I selected him as my supervisor. Although I hid myself from him, he asked about my work from my friends and sent me a message to work with him. Therefore, I selected him by force. [Interviewee no.: 52]. Based on the viewpoints of most participants, you may be put in a situation to be forced to select a supervisor although you are not interested to work with him / her.

3.9 Senior Students

Usually, the students try hard to find the required information for selecting a supervisor such as informal networks of senior students or friends. For example, F.R. the specialist of emergency medicine [Interviewee no.: 1]; A.L. PhD. in physiology [Interviewee no.: 28]; M.M. PhD. in medical microbiology [Interviewee

no.: 27]; H.SH and F.S. PhD. in Pedology [Interviewee no.: 44-45]; A.S. PhD. in especial pharmacology [Interviewee no.: 33]; etc. used the views of friends and former students among other methods in order to select their supervisor.

A.S. PhD. in pharmacology [regarding selecting a supervisor though senior students] stated that: [...] based on the viewpoints of senior students, if you select R.F. professor for your thesis, he does not read your thesis and you can copy and paste some points as a whole thesis, and in addition, he writes your proposal – it is better to select M.S. professor ... all of his works are as the same as the others, ... if you are in a laboratory for 10-15 days, it is enough! all of students and colleagues are afraid of him and they do not ask you questions – pharmacology group is very good, you kill 20 mice and change the previous marks of thesis; ... when you are graduated, the instructors and supervisors publish your article and their ranking will change into a professor – [Oh] the head of our faculty participates in all seminars and conferences ... [Interviewee no.: 33]. The above mentioned points refer to other factors for selecting a supervisor which was considered by the interviewees.

3.10 Gender

The finding of this paper shows that most supervisors for completing the PhD. works are male and the females' role is less in this field. As a result, the supervisors of most theses are male. Based on the whole interviews about the gender, of 40 interviews, 35 thesis projects were under the guidance of male supervisors.

In addition, the interviewees pointed out the gender difference (inconsistency) between supervisor and student and they considered it as problem; but they believe that the gender similarity between supervisor and student leads into a convenient discussion, easiness in various travels, meeting with the university colleagues, providing facilities in typing and publishing the articles and the other issues. One of the interviewees in PhD. urban planning stated that: [...] the female supervisor is a great endowment although they are few in number in our universities and also their opportunities ... [Interviewee no.: 43].

F.Q. stated that: [...] all professors were men but if the number of female supervisors were more, I would certainly select a male supervisor because I have a good feeling with them; ... the female supervisors are hardworking, more serious toward works and also they are strict [Interviewee no.: 25].

In accordance with the aforementioned points, it became clear that most students are very serious regarding selecting their supervisor and their gender and also they

consider it as a criterion during their research course; in this regard, a study was done by Margolis (2001) on the relationship and cooperation of supervisors with the students (based on their gender) and he mentioned gender as one of the effective factors on such relationships [Margolis, 2001].

3.11 Supportive Ability of Supervisors

In general, all students who take step in the research course (before the proposal acceptance) are seeking a capable supervisor who guides them in order to complete their thesis, defend them in the defense session and also support them. A.A. PhD. in mechanics [Interviewee no.: 18], M.Sh. PhD. in general psychology [Interviewee no.: 48]; M.J. PhD. in criminal rights and sociology [Interviewee no.: 34] believed that the supervisor must be able to defend their students. A.A. said that: [...] M.Z. supervisor defended and supported one of the senior students in a way that I was surprised. [Interviewee no.: 18].

3.12 Futurism (Anticipating the Future)

In some interviews, it became clear that most interviewees selected their supervisors in order to have a good job in the future, and do most of their research projects with them and also participate in publishing different scientific books; in addition, some others expected a good communication with the global scientific society through their supervisors.

Certainly, some students would ask their supervisors to employ them in the universities or be their references in order to have a good job. H.KH. specialist in emergency medicine said that: one of the reasons [for me] to select a supervisor is that I find access to a good executive position in the ministry because my supervisor was in contact with the authority individuals or characters. [Interviewee no.: 1].

4. Discussion

Since experience is a description of a real situation, it includes a decision and its effect on a problem, opportunity or an especial subject. Therefore, the previous experiences are not excluded from this norm and in fact, it is a description of that period in which the individuals face a complex problem and they are forced to make a decision. So, the obtained results from the experiences of PhD. students in order to select a supervisor were presented as following.

This paper showed that the students did not have access to accurate information for selecting their supervisor during their research course in PhD. degree and they related this issue to some points such as the negligence of students in order to select

a supervisor, lack of skillful supervisors in an especial field and also the persistence of universities for selecting a supervisor from their own universities. The students did not know which factors are effective on selecting a supervisor and how they can communicate with their supervisors in order to solve their problems easily.

Also this paper pointed out the selection of supervisors as imposed directly or indirectly from the universities on the students. Other points which were considered by the students for selecting a supervisor indirectly are as the following:

- Behavior and ethics of supervisors,
- Executive position;
- Having knowledge in an especial scientific field;
- Futurism (anticipating the future) in order to have a good job in a near future by using the knowledge of supervisors;
- Access to the supervisor without any intermediation;
- High scientific capacity of supervisors in the field of statistics and research;
- Selecting the supervisor based on gender;
- The supportive ability of supervisors in order to defend the students and
- Asking the views of senior students.

5. Conclusion

The results of this paper are consistent with the results of other papers which studied the effective role of supervisors during the research course [Heinrich, 1991; Conrad and Phillips, 1995; Donald et al., 1995; Margolis, 2001; Drysdale, 2003, Fazeli, 2004, Attaran, 2009]. Furthermore, the results showed that among all effective factors on the research course, selecting the supervisor has a considerable effect on facilitating the trend of research course and its final quality. This finding is in relation with the study of these researchers: Ives & Rowley, 2005; Lindgreen et al., 2002; Ray, 2007; and Grevholm et al., 2005. In fact, more satisfaction of students from their supervisor makes their relationships with their supervisors more desirable which affect the research course indirectly.

Regarding the ethical considerations, first a session was held for introducing the researcher and the research. In this session the participants were informed that they can leave the meeting at any time they felt unwilling to cooperate without any

explanation, and their information will remain confidential. Finally the study approved by ethics committee consist of professors.

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