Exploring the Hidden Curriculum as a Catalyst for Moral Development among Secondary-Level Students in Private Schools of District East, Karachi

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the influence of the hidden curriculum on the moral development of secondary-level students in private schools located in District East, Karachi. While formal curricula are carefully structured and assessed, the hidden curriculum comprising implicit values, norms, behaviours, and social expectations conveyed through school culture, teacher-student interactions, peer influence, and institutional practices plays a critical but often overlooked role in shaping students' moral outlook.Using a constructivist interpretive approach, the study investigates how secondary school students internalize moral values through informal educational experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, classroom observations, and analysis of school documents such as codes of conduct, assembly scripts, and behavioural policies. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and insights related to students' moral reasoning, behaviour, and ethical decision-making.Findings suggest that the hidden curriculum significantly contributes to students' moral development both positively and negatively depending on the modelling of behaviour by teachers, institutional discipline policies, reward systems, peer dynamics, and the overall school ethos. The study highlights the need for educational leaders and policymakers to recognize, monitor, and intentionally shape the hidden curriculum to promote holistic moral education.This research provides valuable insights for school administrators, curriculum planners, and teacher educators aiming to foster character development alongside academic achievement within private educational settings.

Keywords: Hidden Curriculum, Moral Development, Educational Ethics, School Culture, Teacher-Student Interaction, Informal Learning

Introduction

Education is not merely about transmitting academic content through teacher's guide and text book. A relatively invisible and powerful force lies beyond the visible curriculum—it is the hidden curriculum which greatly influences the students' attitudes, behaviours and moral values. The hidden curriculum refers to the written, unwritten, hidden and usually unintended lessons, values and norms which students learn from the school culture and climate. It permeates daily routines, teacher–student interactions, school disciplinary policies, peer relations and institutional

traditions. Certainly, its influence on students' personal and social development is obvious and long lasting although not explicitly documented. In the context of Pakistan's private education sector particularly in urban settings like District East, Karachi schools often position themselves as moral as well as academic institutions. However, the moral outcomes of students are not solely shaped by prescribed curricula or moral education classes, but also by the hidden messages conveyed through school practices and structures. Despite its significance, the hidden curriculum remains underexplored in the local context, especially with regard to its role in students' moral development. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating how the hidden curriculum operates in private secondary schools and how it contributes to or undermines the moral development of students. The research, when observed qualitatively, seeks to discover the life experiences of students and teachers, along with finding any hidden lessons in school life at District East's private institutions in Karachi. District East of Karachi is both densely populated and home to many different private schools that are separated by their families' backgrounds, the way they are religiously oriented and the approach to learning each school takes. At these schools, academic competition is common and results are seen as test scores and how pleased the parents are. Because of this, schools often pay little attention to moral and character growth, even though it is supposedly very important in their mission and vision statements.

Most private schools in this area function in a challenging socio-cultural situation. Students in Karachi are from many ethnic and linguistic backgrounds which shows the multicultural character of the city. It leads to opportunities as well as challenges for building moral values through the activities kids experience in school. First, interaction with individuals from various cultures encourages values such as tolerance, empathy and being inclusive. Sometimes, class division in schools maintains unfair attitudes, pushes students to fight for advantages and makes some students feel like they do not belong. Typically, District East's private schools mix education from the West with Islamic values. As a result, the hidden curriculum is shaped in many different ways. Although Islamic values may be taught during certain meetings or religious classes, if the school's discipline is overly harsh or if there are cases of inequity recognized by students, teachers' actions might be out of line with the moral lessons. Moreover, there is not much regulation in private education in Karachi which means that there are major differences in what each school offers and teaches its students. Since teachers might act differently in various lessons, the hidden curriculum matters more and is tougher to manage. Oftentimes, students pick up moral values from their normal school routines, like how teachers use discipline, treat them and handle fairness. This research conducted at local private schools in District East helps us see, in precise detail, the informal ways schools affect students' morality in this urban part of the country.

Research Objectives:
- To identify the key elements of the hidden curriculum present in private secondary schools in District East, Karachi.
- To examine how teachers and students perceive the hidden curriculum in their school environment.
- To analyse the ways in which the hidden curriculum shapes students' moral values and ethical behaviour.
- To explore the role of school culture, teacher behaviour, and peer interactions in transmitting the hidden curriculum.

- To provide recommendations for school administrators and policymakers on how to effectively integrate positive moral development through the hidden curriculum.

Research Questions: This study aimed to address the following research questions:
- What are the key components of the hidden curriculum in private secondary schools of District East, Karachi?
- How do teachers perceive and describe the influence of the hidden curriculum on students' moral development?
- How do secondary-level students experience and interpret the hidden curriculum in their schools?
- In what ways do school culture, teacher behavior, and peer interactions contribute to students' moral growth through the hidden curriculum?
- What strategies can school administrators implement to harness the hidden curriculum for promoting positive moral development?

Literature Review

Concept of Hidden Curriculum
The term hiddencurriculum was first coined by Philip W. Jackson (1968) in his seminal work Life in Classrooms, where he identified the implicit lessons and social norms conveyed in educational settings beyond the formal syllabus. Such things consist of how students view authority, social obligations and cultural customs which they pick up without being aware of it through day-to-day school activities. The sociologist Michael Apple (1979) argued that the hidden curriculum upholds social inequality by giving privilege to certain groups while reinforcing the leading ideologies and power structures in society. Likewise, Bernstein states that the hidden curriculum includes class-based rules that are taught in schools by usual methods. The hidden curriculum influences students and is not something that happens randomly but rather forms a crucial part of education. It consists of space and time structure, teachers' attitudes, methods of rewarding and penalizing students and the influence of peers (according to Jackson, 1968 and Apple, 1979). It is important in modern education discussions to see the hidden curriculum to learn how schools impact students' values and behavior beyond the lessons they teach.

Hidden Curriculum and Moral Development
Moral development consists of various activities that help people see what is right from what is wrong, think about right and wrong and form their own set of moral values (Kohlberg, 1981). Schools are considered important places for this development, but experts say that only the official curriculum does not provide enough support. Lapsley and Narvaez (2006) believe that the hidden curriculum helps students understand and practice how to be fair, honest, empathetic and respectful in everyday occasions. Nucci and Narvaez (2008) highlight that moral education occurs through both explicit teaching and implicit socialization. The hidden curriculum shapes students' moral character by exposing them to institutional norms and expectations that guide everyday conduct. For example, disciplinary measures, recognition of good behaviour, and school rituals embed moral lessons that influence students' ethical growth. Research also shows that the hidden curriculum can reinforce positive moral development or, conversely, contribute to negative outcomes like conformity, obedience without critical reflection, or reinforcement of social inequalities (Tom, 1984; Giroux, 1983).

Teacher-Student Interaction and Moral Socialization

Teachers are central agents in the transmission of the hidden curriculum. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory underscores the importance of observational learning, where students internalize behavioursmodelled by teachers. Wentzel (1997) found that teachers' caring attitudes, fairness, and consistency promote prosocial behaviour and moral understanding among students. Conversely, teacher neglect or punitive attitudes can undermine students' moral development and create alienation. Lickona (1991), a pioneer in character education, emphasized the significance of teacher role modelling and interactions in fostering virtues such as integrity, responsibility, and respect. The subtle cues teachers send through language, tone, and behaviour communicate expectations that shape students' moral frameworks. Moreover, teachers' responses to moral dilemmas or ethical breaches set precedents that influence students' moral reasoning and choices.

School Culture and Peer Influence

School culture comprises the collective values, beliefs, rituals, and norms that create a unique social environment within educational institutions (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Positive school cultures characterized by inclusiveness, mutual respect, and shared ethical standards encourage students to develop strong moral identities (Bryk et al., 2010). Conversely, toxic or fragmented school cultures may hinder moral growth by fostering competition, exclusion, or indifference.

During adolescence, peers have a significant effect on the development of a person's morals. Brown reveals in his 2004 review that peer groups are the source of discussions about what is right and wrong among individuals in the group. Sometimes, peer influence leads people to either cooperate or share which is good, but sometimes it leads to more harmful actions, like bullying and cutting people out. So, peer interactions help form students' morals and guide their actions.

Hidden Curriculum in the Pakistani Context

People have studied the hidden curriculum a lot in Western countries, yet little research exists about how it operates in Pakistan's private schools, mainly in cities such as Karachi. Pakistani education often concentrates on changing the curriculum, evaluating teachers and ensuring students excel academically, but seldom pays attention to the informal grasp of ethics and morals that results from students' interactions with peers and the culture they have at school.According to Javed and Iqbal, private schools in Pakistan tend to focus on education as well as values and they stress discipline, teach religion and encourage respect for authority. Nonetheless, the research team noted that these moral lessons are not consistently applied and usually depend on the values and influence of the school's leaders. The lack of consistency is noticeable in Karachi since this city has wide social gaps, multiple ethnic groups and private schools that are very diverse in their principles and way of working. Khan (2016) reports that although private schools in Karachi strive to be successful academically, they find it tough to truly include character education as a central part of their routines. Professional development for teachers on moral leadership is usually lacking and mostly morality education is given in just a few lessons or informally. In addition, students tend to adopt both helpful and harmful values through the unofficial lessons they learn. Authors Rashid and Malik recently argued in 2019 for an organized look at how Pakistani school students view the hidden curriculum and how it guides their sense of self, values and duty. They argue for studies that look at what really happens in classrooms rather than merely theorizing about them.

In the District East of Karachi, you can find both well-funded English-medium private schools and community schools where education is not as expensive. The wide range of cultures in the classroom shapes several secret curriculum ideas based on what teachers think, the way schools are managed, religious preferences and peer habits. In practice, putting a strong emphasis on obeying and fitting in might accidentally block students from developing their own moral viewpoints, whereas schools that encourage discussions usually help students develop empathy and good judgment. Even though the hidden curriculum shapes students' moral behaviour, there is still very little empirical research looking at this in Karachi's private schools. To resolve this issue, the study looks at secondary-level students in private schools in District East, Karachi. It aims to find out how the hidden curriculum affects students' moral growth and to give valuable suggestions for making this influence stronger through intentional actions at school.

Research Methodology

Research Design
A qualitative research design was used as instrument in this study to examine how the hidden curriculum impacts on secondary level students' moral development in private schools of District East, Karachi. Qualitative research was chosenas it allowed for an in-depth understanding of the subtle and complex social processes involved in transmitting moral values through the hidden curriculum. The study adopted an exploratory and descriptive approach to capture participants' lived experiences and perceptions.

Sampling
A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who were knowledgeable and directly involved in the school environment. The sample included:
- Secondary-level students (grades IX & X) from private schools in District East, Karachi
- Teachers who interacted regularly with students and influenced school culture
- School administrators responsible for managing school policies and environment

4 private schools were selected, with 12–15 participants from each school (students, teachers, and administrators), ensuring diversity in gender, socio-economic backgrounds, and school size.

Data Collection Methods
Multiple qualitative data collection methods wereemployed to gather comprehensive insights:
- **Semi-**structuredinterviews were conducted with teachers and school administrators to understand their perspectives on the hidden curriculum and moral education practices.
- **Focus group discussions (FGDs)** were organized with groups of secondary students to explore their experiences and perceptions of the implicit moral lessons conveyed at school.
- **Classroom and school observations** were conducted to witness the hidden curriculum in action through teacher-student interactions, peer behaviour, and school rituals.
- All interviews and FGDs wereaudio-recorded (with consent), transcribed, and translated if necessary.

Data Analysis
Thematic analysis wasused to interpret the qualitative data. The process included:
1. **Familiarization:** Transcripts were read and re-read to gain immersion in the data.
2. **Coding:** Meaningful data segments related to the hidden curriculum and moral development were identifiedandcoded.

3. **Generating themes:** Codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting recurring patterns.

4. **Reviewing themes:** Themes were reviewed for coherence and alignment with the research objectives.

5. **Defining and naming themes:** Each theme was clearly described and its significance wasarticulated**.**

6. **Writing up:** The findings were integrated with the literature and research questions to provide a comprehensive understanding.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, including:

- Obtaining informed consent from all participants (and parental consent for minors).
- Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms and secure data storage.
- Voluntary participation with the right to withdraw at any time without consequences.
- Sensitivity to participants' comfort when discussing moral and personal topics.

Trustworthiness and Validity

To ensure credibility and rigor, the following strategies were employed:

- **Triangulation:** Multiple data sources and methods (interviews, FGDs, observations) were used**.**
- **Member checking:** Preliminary findings were shared with participants for validation.
- **Peer debriefing:** Academic peers were consulted during data interpretation.
- **Thick description:** Detailed contextual information was provided to enable transferability.

Results

Theme 1: Role of Teacher Behavior in Moral Socialization

Participants emphasized that teachers' behavior, both inside and outside the classroom, served as a primary source of moral learning. Students reported that respectful, caring, and fair treatment by teachers encouraged them to adopt similar values in their interactions. Conversely, some students noted that inconsistent or harsh teacher behaviornegativelyaffected their sense of justice and respect.

"When teachers treat us with respect and listen patiently, it makes us want to be respectful too," one student shared during a focus group discussion.

Theme 2: School Culture Promoting Discipline and Respect

The hidden curriculum of school was pointed out as the emphasis of the schools on punctuality, dress code and discipline which shape the meaning of responsibility and respect of rules to the students. A few of the students and teachers stated that these moral norms were internalised through time thus contributing to their moral growth.

Theme 3: Peer Influence on Moral Behavior

Moral decisions and behaviours made by students were highly influenced by peers. Groups of friends had a positive influence encouraging co operation and honesty and empathy where as there was negative peer pressure leading to many conflicts and unethical behaviour including bullying.

Theme 4: Moral Messages in School Rituals and Assemblies

There were messages for honesty, kindness and social responsibility in school assemblies, prayer sessions and special events. The repetition of these messages helped moral reflection and supported informally taught values

Theme 5: Gaps in Formal Moral Education and Reliance on Hidden Curriculum

The teachers and administrators recognised that the formal moral education came as part of the curriculum; however, much of the moral education was done in a more informal way and through the hidden curriculum. However some participants also felt uneasy that this informal learning was not always directed or reinforced in a systematic way.

Observational Findings

It observed unnecessary interactions between students and teachers during break, because they consolidated respect and empathy. Though, there were some cases of favouritism and occasional disciplinary measures were strict, so it seems as if there are mixed moral messages going on throughout the school functions.

Discussion

This paper finds the hidden curriculum, a major source of moral development of secondary level students of private schools in District East, Karachi. Themes that were extracted from the data corroborated findings in the extant literature, but offered localised insights regarding how informal education processes affected students' ethical development.

Teacher Behavior as a Moral Model

The study agreed with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory which stipulates that teachers provided role model for students, who in turn socialised about morals from them. A positive learning environment was nurtured by teachers who treated students with respect and fairness and encouraged values to be internalised, for instance empathy and responsibility. These results repeated Lickoma (1991) emphasis that character education is dependent on teachers' role modelling , because the students are more likely to learn character and value of these values from vicarious learning. Giroux (1983) worried, however, that the hidden curriculum may also transmit contradictory or negative moral messages and instances of punishing or inconsistent teacher behavior illustrated this.

School Culture and Moral Development

This traditional pedagogy stressed discipline, punctuality, as well as following rules which accorded with Deal and Peterson's (1999) instructional format on school culture. It appears that structured routine and expectations served to influence students' sense of responsibility and respect for authority. This corroborated with Bryk et al., (2010) which argued positive school culture facilitate ethical learning. However, a study also suggests that whereas enforcement of rules without moral reflection could impede understanding of deeper ethical foundation as Tom (1984) warned.

Influence of Peer Groups

The effect of peer dynamics corroborated Brown's (2004) claim that social environment had a great influence in adolescent's moral development. Ethical actions like cooperation and honesty were positively influenced by peer relations and sometimes unethical behaviour including bullying was encouraged by negative peer pressure. The moral learning that took place in informal school contexts was a complex one and this dual role of peer influence with other roles played in it demonstrated that complexity.

School Rituals and Informal Moral Messaging

The morphological features of the hidden curricula in school rituals and assemblies revealed all of a sudden that behind the scenes of informative instruction the hidden curriculum played a moral reinforcement function. Through these platforms school values such as honesty and responsibility were repeatedly exposed and Nucci and Narvaez (2008) content that moral education can take place outside of the classroom.

Gaps in Formal Moral Education

There was a reliance on the hidden curriculum for the moral development with little structured moral education noted. This was similar to the position through Lapsley and Narvaez (2006) that formal education does not develop moral competency as a single factor without help from informal processes. It was indicated that formal and hidden curricula would have to be intentionally integrated to make the integrated curricula consistent and effective.

Contextualizing Findings in the Pakistani Setting

As existing research on hidden curriculum in Pakistan was limited, this study provided some insights to the area from the context of private schools in Karachi. It is clear from our strict discipline and our emphasis on respect that which really reflected our culture back then and the challenges of balancing academics with character education that posed systemic constraints. These results were in favour of findings reported by Javed and Iqbal (2013) and Khan (2016) which emphasised on context sensitive strategies for moral education.

Conclusion & Recommendation

Conclusion

This paper attempted to see the role of the hidden curriculum in the moral development of secondary students of private schools of East District, Karachi. The study found that students acquired significant moral values as much around the formal curriculum, that is, through informal channels particularly the behaviour of teachers, school culture, influence of peers and routine school rituals. Perhaps the most crucial finding was that moral socialisation within school environments put teachers in a central place among those tasked to nurture the children's moral development and become role models whose ethical actions and attitudes shaped the young pupils' appreciation of what is good. Students' moral experiences were reinforced by the school environment (emphasis on discipline and respect) as well as peer groups which worked as supportive and challenging agents for the students. But the hidden curriculum's moral message was sometimes incoherent or simply was not constructive, because of inconsistencies in the teacher's behavior and disciplinary practices.

 One important insight revealed by the study: moral education has been part of the school syllabi but much of the moral learning is informal. It is strikingly apparent that there is an absolute reliance on unstructured, incidental moral socialisation which leads to a pressing need for a level of intentionality and integration between formal moral instruction and the hidden curriculum.
 All things considered, the hidden curriculum holds a great deal of power and is often forgotten, in impacting the moral development of students. It may serve as an excellent instrument to enhance educational efforts of character building and ethical growth if managed consciously.

Recommendations

According to the study, it seems very clear that the hidden curriculum is very significant in the development of students' moral development. As such, schools need to address this influence intentionally so as to ensure that the influence is constructive and lines up with educational goals. After providing an analysis of the hidden curriculum in private secondary schools, recommendations to augment its beneficial effect are given.

1. Teacher Training and Development

Investment is required by private schools in the continuous professional development in the field of moral and ethical education. Teachers should know that they play an implicit role in being moral exemplars and they should receive strategies on how to maintain modelling such values as fairness, empathy and integrity.

2. Creating a Positive School Culture

An inclusive and respectful school climate should be developed by school leaders who encourage and practise ethical behaviour. Policies and discipline practises should be transparent, developmentally appropriate and applied consistently, but for the purpose of sound moral reasoning on the part of students, rather than just compliance

3. Integrating Formal and Informal Moral Education

Schools should fill the gap that exists between the formal moral curriculum and the hidden curriculum by generating opportunities for reflection sessions, exchanging words on moral dilemmas, playing certain roles within the context of an activity and including opportunities for service learning that reinforce explicitly the desired values.

4. Peer-Led Moral Initiatives

Further, this can be achieved by initiating student led programmes such as peer mentoring, conflict resolution teams or moral leadership clubs, to take advantage of positive peer influence and to place students to take ownership of their environment moral.

5. Parental and Community Engagement

Parents and community members should be engaged by schools, through workshops, newsletter and collaborative projects in a bid to guarantee consistency of value taught at school with values reinforced in the home.

Further Research

Further research should be carried out in various school settings such as on public, religious and in rural schools, the effects of the hidden curriculum on other aspects of the student's moral development and with the use of longitudinal designs. The wider the scope of the inquiry, the more inclusive the educational policies would be at the national level.

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