



## Evaluating the Hidden Curriculum and its Impact on the Character Development of Preschool Students

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### How to cite

Gunio, M. J. D., & Fajardo, A. C. (2018). Evaluating the Hidden Curriculum and its Impact on the Character Development of Preschool Students. *Asia Pacific Journal on Curriculum Studies*, 1(1), 20-25. <https://doi.org/10.53420/apjcs.2018.4>

**Abstract.** The hidden curriculum is an oft-neglected aspect in curriculum evaluation due to its implicit nature and the lack of a concrete methodology for evaluating it. However, the elements of socialization it provides are critical to character development especially in the early years of schooling where significant cognitive, social, and emotional skills are being developed. This study thus aimed to evaluate the hidden curriculum and its impact on the character development of preschool students. The hidden curriculum was evaluated using the Illuminative Evaluation Model. The instructional system and learning milieu were examined through document analysis of school documents, observations of classroom instruction, and interviews among teachers, school personnel, and administration. Progressive focusing on culled issues was conducted through surveys, structured observations, and focus-group discussions. Themes derived were organized to describe the hidden curriculum and its impact on character development. The hidden curriculum emerged in the following aspects: the forms of inculcation of school values and principles; approaches to character development; structures facilitating readiness for formal schooling practices; physical environment and organization; and teacher-administrator relationships. In conclusion, the hidden curriculum was found to influence character development by working implicitly in the accomplishment of the school's goals, or unintentionally in the frustration of these goals.

**Keywords:** curriculum evaluation, hidden curriculum, character development, Illuminative Evaluation Model, qualitative evaluation

### Introduction

Curriculum evaluation is a critical process in curriculum development, as it sheds light on how planned courses, programs, activities, and learning opportunities actually produced the desired results (Print, 1993; Ornstein & Hunkins, 1993). One commonly neglected component in this process of evaluation, however, is the hidden curriculum. Due to the prominence of more objective methods (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972), the focus becomes the measurable aspects of the curriculum, primarily, the planned or formal curriculum (Elliot et al. 2016). Nevertheless, what is internalized by the students and influences character development, are not merely those derived from the formal curriculum, but rather, from the learned curriculum. The learned curriculum encompasses the changes in values, perceptions, and behavior resulting from school experiences. This is critical in understanding the overall experience of the student, and the relevance of the curriculum as a whole (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972; Ornstein & Hunkins, 1993; Glatthorn et al., 2009; Elliot et al., 2016).

The hidden curriculum is significant for it reveals those aspects of schooling, other than the formal curriculum, that seem to produce changes in student values, perceptions, and behaviors. It is reflected through the different values, dispositions, and social behavioral expectations of the different actors in a school. It emphasizes a set of skills and actions which have little to do with educational goals but are deemed necessary for satisfactory progression through school as a requirement to institutional expectations (Jackson, 1968). This social conditioning in schools plays a critical aspect in students' character development, for character is largely influenced by social, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of the students' life. However, the means toward character development is not typically explicit in the formal curriculum. This is due to the tendency of schools to focus on cognitive development and growth in literacy due to factors such as parental expectations, national emphasis on academic performance, and the preparation demanded by educational institutions (Schwartz, 2008; Priest, 2007; cited in Elliot et al., 2016; Marini et al., 2018). Moreover, it is important to examine character development in early education for the critical development of cognitive, social, and emotional skills starts in early education.

The hidden curriculum, therefore, as that which provides the elements of socialization which take place in schools, and yet are not part of the formal curricular content plays a major role in students' character development. It influences the norms, values, and belief systems imparted to students as they deal with the formal curriculum, and the workings of the school and classroom life (Tallerico, 2012; Glatthorn et al., 2009; Margolis, 2001).

Due to the complexity of forces influencing student development, this study focused on preschool students to minimize the multiplicity of factors which come into play in students' character development as they grow in age and educational level. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the hidden curriculum and its impact on the character development of preschool students. Specifically, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What are the student characteristics which the school aims to develop through its formal curriculum?
  - a. What deviations or inconsistencies (positive or negative) in student characteristics had there been when this curriculum was implemented?
  - b. What unintended outcomes or unplanned consequences as related to student behaviors and attitudes were encountered during implementation?
2. What specific deviations and unintended outcomes related to students' character development are based on the hidden curriculum, and demand a more sustained and intensive inquiry ('progressive focusing')?
3. How can the principles and patterns in students' character development be organized to describe the hidden curriculum?

## Literature Review

### Curriculum evaluation and the hidden curriculum

The curriculum is "the content or substance, which includes the ideas, knowledge, skills, and dispositions that schools seek to cultivate among students" (Tallerico, 2012, p. 2). This substance, which is imparted to students, however, goes beyond that which lies in the intended curriculum. The intended curriculum, consisting of the written, the supported, the taught, and the tested curriculum, works in conjunction with the hidden curriculum to form the learned curriculum (Glatthorn et al., 2009).

Jackson (1968) coined the term 'hidden curriculum' to underscore how various attitudes and behaviors are latently transmitted and reinforced by the schools. He emphasized that the hidden curriculum emphasized specific skills which had little to do with educational goals but are essential to satisfactory progression through school and are requirements for conformity to institutional expectations (Margolis, 2011). Eisner (1985) called it the 'implicit curriculum' while Martin (1976) noted how it is the 'unwritten curriculum.' These conceptions highlight how the hidden curriculum is used to describe the values, expectations, and outcomes which are not included in the formal curriculum but are learned by the students, impacting the development of their behavior, attitudes, and character (Eisner, 1985; Martin, 1976; King, 1986; Goodlad, 1984). Furthermore, critical theorists' perspective on educational systems as oppressive agencies of domination pointed out to the hidden curriculum as the enabling mechanism behind this (Hlebowitsh, 1994; Vallance, 1973). Portelli (1993), thus, underscores four major meanings of the hidden curriculum identified in the literature. The first refers to the unofficial expectations, or implicit but expected messages. Secondly, there are the unintended learning outcomes or messages. The hidden curriculum also refers to the implicit messages drawn from the structure of schooling, while the fourth pertains to the hidden curriculum created by students.

An examination of the hidden curriculum as part of curriculum evaluation may yield deep insights about the probable reasons for inconsistencies or misalignment between the intended and the learned curriculum. In Goodlad's classic study (1984) on American public schools, he revealed how the development of critical thinking and creative thought suffer in schools. Major reasons for these were the physical environment and the instructional methods which inhibit inspiration, creativity, wonder, and collaboration. Instead, what were developed among students were passivity and independence which were deemed inconsistent with the perpetuated goals of the school.

Similarly, a study in a Turkish private elementary school revealed that even though schools were intended to promote democratic ideals, the aspects of the hidden curriculum such as: (1) teacher as the authority figure, (2) teacher opinion as more valuable than student opinion, and (3) answers as more valuable if it is in the way teachers like, fulfilled the contrary. Moreover, the study conducted by Sari & Doganay revealed that teacher behaviors toward students which tend to be humiliating, threatening, and rude proved damaging to the promotion of democracy among students (cited in Cobanoglu & Engin Demir, 2014). Having a full understanding of student experiences through the learned curriculum entails a holistic evaluation of the curriculum which includes the hidden curriculum. Therefore, in the process of curriculum evaluation, one should go beyond what is taught to what is caught by the students during their schooling. This can be done by analyzing the workings of the intended curriculum along with an uncovering of the hidden curriculum.

### **The components of the hidden curriculum**

Despite the fact that the hidden curriculum is a recognized aspect in understanding the curriculum as a whole, there have been different attempts to outline what its components may involve.

One of the precursors to the subject is David Gordon (1982) who divided it into (1) outcomes – the nonacademic attitudes, norms, perceptions, skills, etc. promoted by the school, (2) the school environment – the physical and social set-up which conveys meanings and messages about relationships, social arrangements and physical setting, and (3) the modes of influence – the unconscious and unplanned influences in school organization and structure.

Glatthorn et al., (2009) on the other hand, identified the aspects of the hidden curriculum by representing it through constants and variables. The constants of the hidden curriculum, according to these authors, are the important aspects of the hidden curriculum which are so intrinsic to the nature of schools as a cultural institution. Those which they consider to be the variables of the hidden curriculum, nevertheless, are those aspects which can be more readily changed by educators, which they further classified into three categories, namely, organizational, social-system and culture variables. The organizational variables generally comprise the procedures by which teachers are assigned and students grouped for instruction. The social-system variables, on the other hand, refer to the patterned relationships of persons and groups in the school. These would involve administrator-teacher relationships, teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, or even parent participation in the school community. The last set of variable is the culture variables which were referred to as “the social dimensions concerned with belief systems, values, cognitive structures and meanings” (cited in Glatthorn, et al., 2009, p. 28).

Most of the attempts to understand the hidden curriculum have used the concept of emergent themes to frame their analysis. In a study on the hidden curriculum in the field of medical professionalism, a cultural web was employed to identify the elements of the hidden curriculum which is categorized into: core assumptions, routines, rituals, control systems, organizational factors, power structures, stories, and symbols (Mossop, et al., 2013).

Thus, in researching the hidden curriculum, aspects which need to be considered are the forms of discrimination, indoctrination, and cultural inculcation within the formal education of curriculum systems; the ways and extent to which the environment of educational institutions structures learning conditions and processes; and the unstated rules necessary for successful completion of formal education (cited in Cotton et al., 2013, p.194).

Furthermore, in the study of Cotton et al., (2013), it was noted that in researching the hidden curriculum, a particular facet is usually focused on by researchers given that the hidden curriculum is not a singular concept but one that is characterized by complexity and intersectionality. Such studies mentioned are examples of attempts to understand the hidden curriculum and its components through different frameworks, enabling us to see its dynamics given various institutional settings. This study thus focuses on the aspect of character development as influenced by the hidden curriculum.

### **Character development and the hidden curriculum**

Through its socializing and ideological functions in the school, the hidden curriculum plays a critical role in forming the values, beliefs, and behavior of the students. The elements of socialization provided by the hidden curriculum impacts students' character development through the transmission of dominant values (Margolis, 2001; Zajda, 2014).

The critical stage by which a student is ushered into a school's formal and hidden curricula is the preschool years. Children at this stage begin to be socialized into schooling patterns and to the process of enculturation of rules, values and dispositions which will be critical to the students' success in education.

In order to understand how character development proceeds through the school's hidden curriculum, it is important to have an awareness of the institution's professed religious beliefs or spiritual orientation, the interplay of the social capital of the members of the school community and that of the school itself and how students progress in developing moral confidence (Gunio & Fajardo, 2015). In the process of character development, three critical aspects of a person are involved. This includes the cultivation of their cognition, emotion, and behavior (Windmiller et al., 1980), therefore entailing a holistic approach in the context of evaluation.

## Methods

### Research procedures

Therefore, this study utilized the Illuminative Evaluation Model (IEM) as a methodological framework (Gunio & Fajardo, 2015). The research aimed to evaluate the hidden curriculum and its impact on the character development of preschool students. Central concepts to the IEM are the instructional system and the learning milieu. The instructional system is a catalog description containing the idealized specification of the school's program, while the learning milieu refers to the social-psychological and material environment of the school. In order to get an accurate and more complete picture of the curriculum, evaluation should proceed beyond the intended and implemented, to that of the learned curriculum. This would require a comprehensive description of the learning milieu through which the details of implementation occur.

This makes the IEM appropriate for a study on the hidden curriculum due to its focus on description and interpretation rather than measurement and prediction. Also it is commonly used in the context of a classroom or classrooms in a school which involves small-scale curriculum projects (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972; Lubiano, 2013). Parlett & Hamilton (1972) underscores that IEM is a general research strategy wherein the problems define the methods to be used based on the decisions taken in the course of the research. It espouses four main methods for data collection, namely, observations, interviews, questionnaires and tests, and documentary and background sources.

This study is a descriptive research which employed naturalistic methods. The researcher was a participant-observer in the school environment, experiencing what it meant to be a teacher and/or a student. The research was conducted in a private Christian school in San Juan City, Philippines. The primary aim of the school is to provide quality education in a Christian environment that enables students to live and respond to the world from a Biblical perspective.

Total population sample of the preschool level was employed. It has three preschool levels with a total of twenty-five (25) students. These levels were Pre-Kinder, Pre-Kinder 2, and Kindergarten with seven, eight, and ten students, respectively. With the given sampling, the key characteristics of each differing level was examined. Also, the reinforcement and progression of initiatives on character development across increasing preschool levels was compared. The research was conducted for approximately four months during the start of classes for the school year, thus involving adjustment periods especially for the Pre-Kinder 1 students. Due to the overlapping schedules of the preschool classes, the researcher did alternating observations among the preschool sections.

### Data analysis

Following the IEM's framework (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972), the study involved understanding and describing the instructional system in the first stage, Investigate. Document analysis of school and curriculum documents comprising the school manual, formal curriculum for kindergarten, the Department of Education's learning standards for kindergarten, preschool textbooks, teachers' lesson plans and unit plans, and students' and teachers' profiles was conducted. This stage also included the examination of the learning milieu. This was done through daily classroom observations; interviews with key people from the administration, preschool teachers, and select school personnel; and further document analysis of relevant documents.

The next stage, Inquire Further, involves selecting particular concerns and deviations found pertinent to understanding the influences of the hidden curriculum on character development. Progressive focusing was done through parent surveys, structured daily observations, and a focus-group discussion with the three preschool advisers.

The last phase, Explain, concerns interpretation and explanation. From the collected data and information, the researcher derived principles, themes, and patterns which may explain organizational structures, reveal cause-and-effect relationships, and situate messages and meanings in a broader explanatory context (Lubiano, 2013). In the study, this involved the validation of initial findings with the administration through another focus-group discussion.

Constructs, categories and themes (CCT) were derived from the qualitative data gathered through document analysis, interviews, focus-group discussions, and observations. Coding and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the survey in order to supplement and triangulate initial data. Cumulative data was then organized to describe the hidden curriculum and its impact on students' character development.

## Results and Discussion

### Student characteristics targeted to be developed through the intended curriculum

The school studied has as its primary objective the promotion of Christian education which attests to the highest standards of morality, Christian behavior, and academic excellence as conditioned by a Christian environment. In the examination of the instructional system, five key traits to be developed among the students were identified.

The first is *godly leadership*. This concept of leadership is hinged on total development wherein spiritual development gains primacy and is foundational to building all other aspects of a student's life. Students are to be strong and God-fearing leaders, patriotic envoys, change agents, and accomplished dreamers who will be influencers in society. Secondly, is the *Lordship of Christ*. This is founded on the core values of the church which the school is a ministry of. Students are desired to be born-again Christians who profess Jesus Christ as their Lord. Third is *excellent Christian lifestyle* which centers on the school philosophy that spiritual disciplines are core to the development of habits, discipline, responsibility and accountability which affects all other aspects of the students' lives. The fourth trait is lives of legacy where students focus not on their selves but in using their God-given gifts to fulfill the purposes of Christ in this world. Lastly, *global competence* emphasizes the primacy of the development of English language fluency in conjunction with an enhanced and advanced curricula in different learning areas. The processes and contexts by which these are achieved were carefully investigated with the aim of understanding how the hidden curriculum interplays with the character development of preschool students.

### Inconsistencies and unintended outcomes related to character development and the hidden curriculum

In the process of examining the learning milieu, progressive focusing was conducted on pertinent inconsistencies and unintended outcomes in students' character development which were deemed related to the hidden curriculum.

First, *repetitive cases of obedience* observed were attributed to the incoherence of character development practices between the school and the home. Moreover, the teaching strategies were generally traditional with lectures used in the classrooms, thus enforcing rote learning of behavior. Furthermore, *self-centered leadership* developed among Kindergarten students was contrary to the desired godly leadership. This was influenced by the traditional means of performance assessment which encourages individual achievement and competition. In connection to this, *prejudiced treatment and attitude towards classmates* was observed where students spoke ill of some of their classmates. This reflected their teachers' practice of publicly reprimanding and addressing problematic behavior of these students.

Another inconsistency documented was students' *lack of interest and lazy disposition towards studying*. With the aim of developing global competence, the Kindergarten level in particular are given a heavy volume of subjects compared to that required in the national curriculum. Some students and parents attested that this led to challenges in student motivation. This was related to the *incongruent teaching philosophies* found where the goals espoused in the formal curriculum do not align with the teaching practices in the classroom. Teachers underscored that while they believe in the use of more progressive approaches, they are inhibited to do so due to the lack of materials, excessive teaching loads, and required paper works. There was also an *inconsistency in implementation of language policies*. Particularly, this is in the implementation of English as Mother Tongue which was decided upon based on the aim towards global competence. The school has an English-speaking policy even though most preschool students are primarily Filipino language speakers.

Finally, *management and policy concerns* were revealed among which are excessive teaching load, lack of personnel support, and deficiencies in benefits and compensation. Teachers perceive that the preschool level is under-prioritized in terms of resources, and that they are undervalued in terms of their service. The administrators, on the other hand, refer to teachers' mismanagement of available resources and time that contribute to these perceptions.

### The hidden curriculum and its impact on character development

In describing the hidden curriculum, five distinct aspects emerged as reflected through the following: (1) forms of inculcation of school values and principles; (2) approaches to character development; (3) structures facilitating readiness for formal schooling practices; (4) physical environment and organization; and (5) teacher-administrator relationships.

**Forms of inculcation of school values and principles.** The school studied aimed to inculcate Christian values and principles as foundations by which knowledge and truth are to be understood. This process of inculcation proceeded through formal ceremonies, class routines, and weekly memory verses.

*Formal ceremonies* include weekly mini-church services and flag ceremonies. By integrating religious activities and practices in their weekly schedule, the spiritual and the academic are intertwined. The discipline of the spiritual life thus provides training and perspective in one's academic life. *Class routines* centered on specific class rules which enforce the importance of praying at all times, following authority, and achieving high grades for recognition. These instilled the primacy of communicating with God, the importance of compliance to rules and authority, and the drive for individual achievement. While practice reinforces behavioral development, the system of rewards and punishment used to condition these practices may be regarded as unfitting for developmental discipline. This is due to its inability to encourage discipline based on internal values and intrinsic motivation (Priest, 2007). The *memorization and recitation of Scripture verses* is a weekly practice that instills that the Bible is the source of truth. Memorization provides the discipline that facilitates acquisition of knowledge on Christian morality. Character and values then become the products of internalizing the Scriptures through a dialectical process of development (Suhartini et al., 2019).

**Approaches to character development.** While research provides us with empirical character education implementation strategies (Berkowitz, 2011), the approaches to character development utilized in the preschool are rather employed based on the teacher's autonomy and discretion. These strategies that condition culture and norms may thus be considered as part of the unofficial expectations that constitute the hidden curriculum (Portelli, 1993). As Portelli notes, "Schools undoubtedly do influence children in more ways than by overtly instructing them or otherwise consciously teaching them" (p. 345). Based on practices documented in the classroom, teachers employ these approaches in the teaching of values and character: Social conventions are framed as 'moral' principles to induce practice; dialogue and reflection are used to facilitate behavior correction through moral reasoning; students report their classmates' misbehaviors to establish a system of 'accountability' among them; explicit responses or action required in a problematic situation are taught through role playing; misbehaviors or class violations are publicly addressed when reinforcing class rules; fear of authority is induced to oblige obedience to classroom rules; behavioral skills are taught directly through demonstration; rewards and punishments are used to enforce compliance; teacher conferences are held to address issues; parent-teacher conferences are conducted if issues need further escalation; and positive confession of desired attitude is practiced to promote internalization of behavior.

While the approaches to character development were found to be mainly effective as gathered through observations, parent surveys, and school personnel interviews, there were also concerns identified which proved attributable to this aspect of the hidden curriculum. These were mainly the repetitive cases of obedience, self-centered leadership developed among students, and prejudiced treatment and attitude towards selected classmates.

**Structures facilitating readiness for formal schooling practices.** Part of the school goal upon graduating students from preschool is that they are accustomed to formal schooling practices. The training induced to develop this readiness is implicit in the school's organization and structure through training for independence through classroom routines; extended writing practices; an increased volume of subjects as compared to the typical preschool load, and participation in formal ceremonies normally assigned to older students.

The school's training for readiness appeared to be fulfilled accordingly through the students' outputs. However, an analysis of student conversations related to their extended writing practices and increased volume of subjects revealed that it tended to promote negative attitudes toward schooling.

**Physical environment and organization.** Another crucial factor in the integration of character development is through the provision of facilities which works in the development of certain dispositions among preschoolers (Margolis, 2001). The school environment functioned by conditioning them into: being more independent through the types and arrangement of furniture and facilities used in progressing levels; an increased consciousness on their behavior due to close monitoring aided by electronic equipment; prioritizing discipline over interaction through the class' seating organization; and being appreciative of a rather meager representation of nature within the school facilities.

**Teacher-and-administration relationships.** The more complex realm of the hidden curriculum lies in the personhood of the teachers and the administrators, and most importantly, the connections between them. This defines the culture and policies in the school that influences character development.

The hidden curriculum's impact existed beyond concerns within the classroom doors and into the more personal nature of the following aspects: teachers' personality contributing to preferences and perspectives transmitted in the classroom; the poor relationship between teachers and administrators; and the pervading conception of teaching as a spiritual act of service or ministry leading to issues on inadequacies on support and incentivization. The study revealed that despite teachers' passionate recognition of their role and responsibilities, teacher motivation and retention was low. Teachers reported that their efforts and dedication to the ministry were not reciprocated by the administration due to lack of support and minimal compensation.

These were found to be crucial elements from an organizational perspective which largely influenced the work culture and approaches that conditioned the environment by which students' character is developed.

### Conclusions

This study aimed to evaluate the hidden curriculum and its impact on the character development of preschool students. Through the use of the Illuminative Evaluation Model, a more holistic picture of the learning milieu was derived facilitating an understanding of the dynamics of the hidden curriculum and how it influences character development. Based on this study, the investigation process should consider the ways by which the instructional system worked and did not work in the context of the learning milieu.

Phenomena which produced similar results must be considered in order to highlight the significant features of the program, and the mechanisms that make it possible. On the other hand, the disparities in behavior observed should be progressively focused upon to illuminate the underlying mechanisms which work to frustrate or deviate from the intended program goals. Based on this study, the hidden curriculum can both serve to fulfill or to deviate from the instructional system. Thus, the two aspects of disparities and features in students' character development should be taken into account in order to present a more complete picture of how the hidden curriculum interplays with the learning milieu and impacts character development.

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