



## EXISTING PRACTICE OF WRITTEN AND UNWRITTEN CURRICULUMS AND THEIR IMPACT ON STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IN NEPAL

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### Abstract

*This study aims to examine the existing implementation of curriculum in school education, including explicit, covert, and null-curriculum aspects. This has been conducted in the community schools of Kathmandu to examine the factors contributing to the difference between the expected learning outcomes of school education and the actual results as stated in the curriculum. The study involved grade-eight students and their teachers from five community schools situated in the suburban suburbs of Kathmandu. The authors used a range of data collection techniques, including thorough interviews, group discussions, and direct observation. The study found that educational activities that encourage students to create meaningful connections are more valuable than those that discourage them from gaining real-world knowledge and skills. The curriculum promotes educational activities that actively engage learners and are guided by teachers. This approach helps students develop the necessary academic and transversal competencies. To cultivate students with the necessary skills, it is crucial for the curriculum to address the adverse effects of inadequate teaching and the overemphasis on high-stakes testing. This has resulted in a disproportionate emphasis on exam-focused instruction and learning. The study suggests that the curriculum should integrate the essential elements of the written, hidden, and null curriculum to provide hands-on learning experiences and promote the growth of both academic and transferable skills in children.*

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### GENERAL BACKGROUND

The school, through its student body, reflects and represents the sociocultural practices of the society it serves. In an academic setting, students have the opportunity to exchange their language, behavior, and cultural knowledge acquired from their homes or communities. During this process, they gain a vast amount of knowledge from each other and collaboratively develop their own understanding. Consequently, there are important messages for them to remember from the school. The most important aspect is the core messages that

student's gain and the hands-on experiences they receive, rather than the information provided by professors.

Gaining knowledge is a continuous pursuit that extends throughout one's lifetime and can be accomplished through various means, including books, online resources, videos, podcasts, interactive platforms, and personal experiences. At times, we gain knowledge incidentally when we encounter someone or something without any specific intention or plan. Therefore, students' acquisition of knowledge extends beyond the confines of a classroom, a

textbook, or a particular educational program. The study has gathered insights from educators and learners regarding three distinct curriculum models. In addition, it has thoroughly analyzed the process of constructing meaning in different curricula and the effects they have.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been three types of curriculum practiced in schools, as described by Cahapay (2020), include the overt curriculum, which is taught and learned; the hidden curriculum, which is not taught but learned; and the null curriculum, which is not taught and not learned. The null curriculum, as described by Ornstein and Hunkins (2018), encompasses content and values that have been left out. The overt curriculum is also referred to as the explicit curriculum or stated curriculum. The curriculum encompasses the subjects and topics that are intended to be taught and mastered.

As Urevbu (1985) states, the explicit curriculum encompasses the syllabus and the content that students are expected to learn (Gholami et al., 2016). This is a meticulously organized and well-structured set of teaching-learning objectives, where the learning content and classroom activities are intentionally designed and outlined by the governing bodies. It offers comprehensive learning materials and engaging activities to meet the specific goals of an educational program. The explicit curriculum is the curriculum that is formally documented. For instance, curriculum guides, textbooks, and syllabi serve as official documents that provide a clear direction for teachers, students, and authorities to ensure that educational activities are well-organized, managed, and systematic in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

Likewise, the hidden curriculum is not explicitly stated, in contrast to the written curriculum. It is referred to as the curriculum that is not explicitly taught or written down, but is still influential and present in education (Sarpong & Korley, 2021). The written curriculum, also referred to as the overt, explicit, or formal curriculum, consists of a curriculum document, texts, films, and other teaching materials that have been carefully selected to help students achieve their goals. The hidden curriculum, also referred to as the unofficial or implied curriculum, encompasses the unintentional lessons that students absorb from their peers, society, and cultures.

According to Alsubaie (2015), a hidden curriculum encompasses the unspoken or implicit

values, behaviors, procedures, and norms that are present in the educational setting. The curriculum designers often overlook certain topics or subjects, considering them irrelevant, unimportant, controversial, or sensitive, and therefore do not include them in the curriculum. First and foremost, the unwritten curriculum encompasses implicit values and beliefs. The omission of certain topics in the written curriculum can subtly communicate a message about the values and beliefs of the school. Students have the opportunity to internalize these underlying messages, which can influence their views on what is deemed significant or insignificant.

Yun et al. (2022) examined how adjusted anatomy education schedules at Seoul National University College of Medicine (SNUCM) affected students' academic performance and happiness. SNUCM anatomy instruction covers the upper and lower limbs, trunk, and head and neck in three distinct portions. Due to COVID-19, the timetable included simultaneous and rotational schedules. In three classes with 50 students each, the authors organized online lectures, cadaver dissections, and written and practical assessments. The study results can help teach anatomy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a study conducted by Lie et al. (2020), the focus was on the Spanish-language patient interactions of physician assistant students during their clinical rotations. This examination took place after the implementation of a required longitudinal medical Spanish curriculum. Students highly appreciated the effectiveness of the curriculum, the opportunity to practice Spanish communication during clinical rotations, the dedication of interpreters, and the potential for future use of medical Spanish. Active learning with feedback, role playing, and curriculum-wide assessments was highly regarded.

The study conducted by Melvin et al. (2015) aimed to analyze the impact of a curriculum administered during a 6-week clinical rotation in Internal Medicine on the objective evaluation of medical students' written communication skills. Prior to the educational programs, consultation notes were collected from the students. Additionally, another round of consultation notes was taken after a period of 6 weeks. Incorporating a resident feedback workshop into the medical student written communication tutorial significantly improves the assessment of consultation note scores in comparison to solely relying on the student tutorial.

The study by Yash et al. (2023) examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on internal medicine education and evaluated the usefulness of new methodologies. Face-to-face written and OSCE exams were used for pre-pandemic assessment. Online written and OSCE tests are being used in the post-pandemic category. Both groups use identical feedback forms. They found that video recordings can achieve the same teaching goals as lectures. They say that greater clinical practice can give students useful experience, although there is no statistical evidence.

Wang and McWatt (2023) examined how several variables predicted performance on written and laboratory exams in a human anatomy course. A focus on learning and visuospatial skills was expected to improve performance. Visuospatial abilities were expected to predict better, especially in lab-based evaluations. Additionally, visuospatial abilities were projected to be positively associated with deep learning and adversely associated with surface learning. Given these findings and the growing use of visually and spatially sophisticated digital learning activities in anatomy, both measures must be considered when assessing educational progress.

Escribano et al. (2022) found modest communicative self-confidence among nursing students. Self-efficacy assessments help educators assess students' communication abilities and understanding of others' needs. This data helps discover areas for improvement and create effective institution plans. It is fundamental to skills-based evaluation. The Spanish version of the Self-efficacy questionnaire-12 in communication skills is reliable and useful for assessing nurse communication self-efficacy.

Riopel et al. (2019) used a rigorous technique to investigate students' views on verbal and written self-peer feedback. Four groups of students' views on receiving SP feedback are: embracing the patient's perspective; acknowledging SPs' valuable role in student learning; recognizing the importance of timely, verbal feedback in cultivating professional behaviors for clinical practice; and boosting student self-confidence in professional behaviors. Standardized patient (SP) feedback in the curriculum can improve PT students' professional behavior.

Weiting et al. (2023) brought together autistic and non-autistic academics to study stigma and prejudice faced by autistic students in Australian institutions. Therefore, they advised curriculum

and teaching method improvements to guarantee that autistic students had learning opportunities that match their learning patterns. University faculty must grasp how trauma affects autistic people. Universities should collaborate with autistic students to design courses and support systems that fit their learning styles. University procedures should also promote accessibility and consider autistic students' assistance needs.

Another factor to consider is the impact of cultural bias and different perspectives. Like any aspect of education, the hidden curriculum can have both positive and negative effects on the school system. One drawback is that it can be difficult to observe hidden aspects of the curriculum, which is often considered impractical. However, educators may use the term 'null curriculum' interchangeably with hidden curriculum, or they may have distinct definitions for each. This concept is frequently utilized in the realm of education to refer to the topics or subjects that are not explicitly taught or included in a formal curriculum, yet can greatly impact students and their educational experiences. Put simply, it pertains to the content that is omitted or overlooked in educational programs.

It emphasizes the underlying messages that students may indirectly absorb without being directly exposed to specific subjects or viewpoints. As an illustration, a curriculum could prioritize specific subjects or values while excluding others. Specifically, the null curriculum encompasses the knowledge and skills that students are not exposed to or given the opportunity to learn within the school's teaching and learning process (Kazemi et al., 2020).

The program offers courses that focus on essential skills needed in today's fast-paced world, including collaboration, creativity, and entrepreneurship. Eisner (1985) introduced the idea of a null curriculum. As per his explanation, the null curriculum encompasses the curriculum content, values, and experiences that the teacher overlooks, but are acknowledged as being disregarded by students, the community, or both (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). Since the null curriculum has been discussed in academic literature, scholars have examined it from two perspectives: as a theoretical concept and as a practical idea.

As a valuable tool, it has been utilized to uplift and empower underrepresented elements of a curriculum. Similarly, it has been applied in the process of observing, describing, and interpreting dormant events of curriculum exclusion in the field (Cahapay, 2020). Whether in the overarching

goal of empowering marginalized groups impacted by external pressures or in the specific task of highlighting instances of curriculum omission.

The curriculum, whether formal or informal, has a significant impact on students' learning outcomes. The curriculum forms the basis for students' educational experiences and the knowledge they gain throughout their schooling (Boateng et al., 2023). Effective student learning is greatly impacted by a well-designed curriculum that is carefully executed and evaluated. Nonetheless, the hidden and null curriculum has an impact on how students construct meaning in their own unique ways.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The researchers in this qualitative research adopted a rigorous approach, employing hermeneutic phenomenology as the research design. They diligently collected valuable insights through in-depth interviews, observations, and group discussions. The participants for the study consisted of fifteen grade-eight students and five teachers who were selected from five public schools in a suburban area of Kathmandu. The thorough interview was conducted through a combination of in-person and online methods. Ensuring ethical standards were upheld, the study followed protocols such as obtaining informed consent, allowing voluntary participation, and guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality (Arifin, 2018).

All participants in the study were given the freedom to choose whether or not to participate, and they had the option to withdraw at any time. Participants' names were kept anonymous by using cryptonyms. We ensured the utmost confidentiality by reassuring them of the sensitive nature of the situation. The information gathered was coded, categorized, and the matized (Friesen et al., 2012). Next, the significance was derived through a thorough analysis of the collected data in conjunction with relevant literature.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As explicit curriculum refers to intentionally designed and planned educational content to implement in the schools, it is the backbone for the expected outcome of the students. Due to its drawbacks, it is necessary to incorporate the elements of implicit or null curriculum. One of the drawbacks of an overt curriculum is rigidity. The written curriculum appears in documents (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). As T1 states, the main focus is on high-

stakes testing. The better grades the students obtain, the happier we, parents, and even the concerned authority become", what knowledge or skills the students achieve is not important; what is important is how well the teachers prepare their students for the high-stakes testing and what grades the students obtains.

The students are tired of rote learning but have to embrace it. Therefore, this rigidity makes teaching-learning more mechanical, and inflexible and hinders students' creativity and critical thinking. The next drawback of a written curriculum is the narrow focus of the curriculum. It neglects other important skills: social-emotional, creativity, practical life skills, etc. because it is heavily influenced by the requirements of standardized tests. The teachers are forced to motivate students for exam-oriented rote learning as teaching real-life skills is meaningless as students' grade determines how good or bad, we are at teaching. The written curriculum has outdated content that is in the interest of dominant elites.

The null curriculum, though it is not planned, practiced, or assessed, has a great influence on students learning. It omits, ignores, or does not address the knowledge and skills that the students need to promote their critical thinking and understanding of the world. It may unintentionally perpetuate cultural bias by omitting the experiences, histories, or contributions of certain groups. It can lack the diversity in perspectives. The third one is critical thinking and awareness. It limits exposure to diverse viewpoints and alternative perspectives, and thus, limits students' critical thinking skills. The other is societal and global awareness.

The null curriculum limits students' exposure to a broad range of topics to promote global awareness and a sense of civic responsibility. The fifth influence of null curriculum is skill development. The written curriculum focuses on academic competencies and ignores emotional intelligence, practical life skills, or digital skills. It also overlooks crucial aspects of students' personal and professional development. The last one is its influence on career choices. The comprehensive curriculum omits career-related topics. The students become aware of various career paths if they have access to career-related courses and information.

The students are neither taught to speak against the seniors' superiors', or respected people's wrongdoings nor learn to speak against them. The fact that whoever does, 'wrong is wrong; and 'mistake is a mistake that should be quoted and

discouraged” is neither taught nor learned. What the students learn is they are to follow the teacher’s instruction but not to instruct the teacher. Such ill practices should be discouraged to empower the students to construct the real meaning as Aliakbari and Faraji (2011) state the goal of critical pedagogy is “to emancipate and educate all people regardless of their gender, class, race, etc. Until and unless the students disagree and critique the seniors’ and superiors’ wrongdoings, we cannot conscientize, empower, and make creative and innovative.

In the context of Nepal, the existing curriculum has not addressed the public demand for quality education. Concerned authorities need to be aware of the null curriculum and strive for a more inclusive and diverse educational experience. For this, regular review of the curriculum and its updating is necessary to ensure a wide range of topics and perspectives for fostering a more comprehensive and enriching learning environment. The influence of the null curriculum, the curriculum that has omitted contents and values (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018) can be significant in shaping students’ perspectives, values, and overall educational experiences. Students may unintentionally learn from what is not taught.

The absence of certain topics or perspectives in the curriculum can lead students to form opinions or acquire information based on what is omitted. This unintentional learning can shape their understanding of the world and influence their attitudes. The null curriculum can reflect cultural biases and values inherent in the educational system. If certain cultural perspectives or histories are excluded from the curriculum, students may develop a limited and potentially biased worldview. Therefore, it plays a role in socializing students into societal norms and values. By omitting certain topics, the education system may reinforce or perpetuate existing social norms and power structures.

For example, the absence of discussions on diversity and inclusion may contribute to the reinforcement of existing inequalities. For the students’ critical thinking and awareness, life skills, and personal development, educators and policymakers need to be aware of the impact of the null curriculum and strive to make intentional decisions about what is included and excluded. Incorporating diverse perspectives, addressing cultural biases, and promoting critical thinking can help create a more balanced and comprehensive educational experience for students.

## DISCUSSION

The school curriculum has a multifaceted impact on students, teachers, and society. It influences various aspects of students’ educational experiences and learning outcomes and broader societal dynamics. One of the impacts of the curriculum is academic achievement and cognitive development in students. The curriculum shapes what the students learn, how they learn, and what impact their learning has on society. For this, it should be designed in such a way that it enhances academic achievement by providing clear learning objectives, engaging instructional materials, and effective assessment strategies. The existing curriculum is highly influenced by the dominance of high-stakes testing as T5 argues, as the main focus is on preparing students for the paper-pencil test rather than actual hands-on experiences.

Teachers, parents, and people in the society including all the concerned authorities prefer students’ better grades to transversal competencies. In the case of cognitive development, a curriculum should be designed in such a way that it emphasizes students’ critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity and promotes their cognitive development. The existing curriculum is weak in providing hands-on experiences that enable students to make connections between different concepts and apply their learning to real-world situations. The next impact of the curriculum is students’ social and emotional learning. Although the curriculum is expected to foster social and emotional skills: empathy, communication, resilience, etc., school education has been stressful, apathetic, and mechanical as S5 states his experience.

Everyone wants good grades, so my focus is on rote learning for good results, otherwise, I will be criticized, insulted, and isolated”. Such force has disheartened students and demoted their critical thinking and creativity. To empower students with both academic and transversal competencies, the provision to promote the inclusive practice of overt, hidden, and null curriculum from policy to practice level is necessary. For this, the incorporation of topics like social justice, diversity, and mental health into the school curriculum is essential for students’ deeper understanding of themselves and others. The third one is preparation for the future.

As curriculum is all the experiences children have under the guidance of teachers (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018), it should include educational activities that prepare students with the

knowledge and skills needed for an increasingly complex and interconnected world. The existing school curriculum is weak to link school education and the skills needed for the students in the changing society. The fourth impact of the curriculum is to maintain equity and inclusion. The existing curriculum, despite its slogan to promote equity and inclusion, has not challenged the existing inequalities in education. The curriculum, being culturally responsive, inclusive, and accessible to all students is expected to address disparities in academic achievement and promote equity in education.

The curriculum as it is influenced by dominant ideology (Monchinski, 2008), is still too weak to empower the oppressed and backward ones. For this, the curriculum is expected to promote student-engaged educational activities in their leadership is needed (T5). For planning and implementing such educational activities, teacher professional development is necessary. The ongoing teacher professional development opportunities have not empowered the teachers to develop and implement learner-engaged educational activities in students' leadership. Therefore, restructuring and improvement in the existing curriculum are necessary.

#### CONCLUSION

The school curriculum in Nepal has challenges in achieving the set goals because of weak curriculum practices and teacher development provisions. Although it has launched student-led, learner-engaged educational activities, its practices are still teacher-dominant and high-stakes testing-oriented. The concerned authorities have not paid attention to promoting appropriate educational practices to empower students with expected competencies. They were found to ignore the role of hidden or null curriculum. The local authorities, as they say, are responsible to manage and create the environment as per the essence of the hidden curriculum.

School curriculum extends far beyond classroom teaching-learning. Limiting students to the written curriculum and forcing students to high-stakes test-oriented rote learning does not cultivate children with the knowledge and skills for the 21st-century changing global world. To meet the evolving needs of the learners and society, all of the curriculums, during their development, need to be addressed inclusively to empower students with the opportunities to grow with their potential talents and abilities.

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