



THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN SECONDARY EDUCATION: AN INTEGRATIVE CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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[Received: [12/05/2026] | Accepted: [27/05/2026] | Published: [06/06/2026]]

ABSTRACT

Hidden curriculum refers to the implicit transmission of values, behavioral norms, and social expectations through institutional practices rather than formal instructional content. This conceptual paper examines the role of hidden curriculum in shaping the moral development of secondary school students by drawing on established theoretical frameworks, including Kohlberg's (1984) stages of moral reasoning, Bandura's (1977) social-cognitive theory, Dewey's (1916) experiential philosophy of education, and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory.

A systematic synthesis of literature (1968–2024) indicates that moral development is primarily influenced through lived school experiences, including teacher behavior, peer culture, institutional structures, and classroom practices. Findings show that alignment between formal and hidden curriculum strengthens moral reasoning, prosocial behavior, and civic responsibility, whereas inconsistency between the two leads to ethical confusion, disengagement, and weakened moral agency.

The study further integrates Islamic educational philosophy through the concept of Tarbiyyah, emphasizing moral development as a holistic, environmental, and relational process. The analysis highlights the convergence between Islamic and Western perspectives in recognizing the importance of environment and moral modeling in education.

The paper concludes with recommendations for teachers, school leaders, curriculum developers, and policymakers to consciously design and align hidden curriculum with desired moral and educational outcomes.

Keywords: *hidden curriculum, moral development, secondary education, Kohlberg, Bandura, Vygotsky, Tarbiyyah, school culture, character formation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Hidden curriculum refers to the implicit learning that occurs through school environment, routines, relationships, and institutional practices rather than formal instruction (Jackson, 1968; Margolis, 2001). It communicates values such as discipline, authority, cooperation, and social norms through lived experience.

Secondary school is a critical stage of moral identity formation, as adolescents are highly influenced by peers, teachers, and institutional culture (Nucci, 2021). At this stage, students actively construct their ethical frameworks through social interaction and experience, making hidden curriculum particularly influential (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

This paper examines how hidden curriculum shapes moral development by integrating psychological, educational, and Islamic perspectives.



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly literature on hidden curriculum spans more than five decades and reflects diverse theoretical, empirical, and critical perspectives on how schools shape students' moral and ethical development beyond formal instruction.

2.1 Foundational Perspectives on Hidden Curriculum

The concept of hidden curriculum was first systematically introduced by Jackson (1968), who argued that schools function not only as academic institutions but also as social environments where students learn implicit lessons through routines, authority structures, and everyday interactions. These "rules, routines, and relationships" constitute a powerful form of social learning that operates continuously within school life.

Dreeben (1968) further developed this idea by suggesting that schooling socializes students into key societal norms such as independence, achievement orientation, universalism, and compliance with institutional authority. These early works established that education is inherently a moral and socializing process, not merely a cognitive one.

2.2 Critical and Sociological Perspectives

Critical theorists expanded the analysis of hidden curriculum by focusing on its ideological and structural dimensions. Giroux (1983) argued that schools do not transmit neutral values; rather, they reproduce existing power relations by promoting conformity, obedience, and acceptance of dominant social norms.

Similarly, Apple (2004) emphasized that both formal and hidden curricula reflect the cultural capital of dominant groups, often marginalizing alternative cultural identities and moral frameworks. From this perspective, hidden curriculum becomes a mechanism of social reproduction, reinforcing inequality and shaping students' perceptions of legitimacy, authority, and fairness.

2.3 Empirical Studies on School Processes

Empirical research has provided strong evidence for the operation of hidden curriculum in everyday school practices. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) demonstrated that teacher expectations significantly influence student performance and self-concept, showing that implicit beliefs and behaviors of teachers become powerful learning signals.

Yüksel (2005) found that students acquire institutional norms primarily through observation and peer interaction rather than direct instruction, highlighting the informal nature of moral learning in schools. More recent work by Thornberg (2021) confirms that moral learning is largely embedded in everyday school interactions, particularly through peer negotiations, informal rules, and teacher-student relationships rather than formal moral education programs.

2.4 Hidden Curriculum and Moral Development

A growing body of research directly links hidden curriculum to moral development outcomes. Akbari and Segers (2019) found that positive school climates characterized by fairness, respect, and transparency are associated with higher levels of advanced moral reasoning among adolescents.

Conversely, Syvertsen et al. (2018) showed that competitive, high-pressure academic environments increase academic dishonesty by implicitly signaling that performance is more important than ethical behavior. This demonstrates how institutional culture shapes moral decision-making.

Caprara et al. (2019) further highlight the role of teachers as moral models, showing that teacher prosocial behavior significantly predicts students' civic engagement and ethical conduct over time.



2.5 Peer Influence and Social Environment

Peer culture is a critical mechanism of hidden curriculum. Malti and Ongley (2014) found that peer norms strongly influence empathy, aggression, and moral sensitivity among adolescents. In environments where bullying or exclusion is normalized, students are more likely to disengage morally or justify unethical behavior.

This supports Bandura's (1977) theory of observational learning, which emphasizes that behavior is shaped through continuous exposure to social models within the environment.

2.6 School Climate and Moral Socialization

Nucci (2021) emphasizes that moral development must be understood within the broader ecology of school life. Students distinguish between moral rules and social conventions through lived experiences within institutional environments.

Research also shows that structured and supportive school climates promote self-regulation, responsibility, and prosocial behavior, while inconsistent or punitive environments weaken moral development (Wang & Degol, 2016).

2.7 Non-Western and Contextual Studies

Studies in non-Western contexts highlight similar but contextually specific patterns. Hossain et al. (2020) found that in South Asian school systems, emphasis on rote learning and exam performance often suppresses moral autonomy and critical ethical reasoning.

In Pakistan, research indicates a persistent gap between formally taught moral values (often rooted in Islamic education) and the implicit practices of schools, including disciplinary methods and competitive academic culture (Durrani & Dunne, 2010; Halstead, 2019). This tension creates complex moral learning environments for students.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study integrates four complementary theories:

- **Kohlberg (1984):** Moral development progresses through stages; school experience influences reasoning.
- **Bandura (1977):** Moral behavior is learned through observation of models.
- **Dewey (1916):** Education is experiential; school is a moral community.
- **Vygotsky (1978):** Moral learning is socially constructed through interaction.

Hidden curriculum operates through:

- Teacher behavior
- Peer culture
- Institutional systems
- School environment

4. POSITIVE DIMENSIONS

4.1 Discipline and Responsibility

Structured routines develop self-regulation and responsibility (Jackson, 1968; Wang & Degol, 2016).

4.2 Cooperation and Ethics

Collaborative learning builds empathy and social responsibility (Dewey, 1916; Durlak et al., 2011).

4.3 Teacher Modeling

Teachers shape moral behavior through example and relationships (Bandura, 1977; Noddings, 2013).



4.4 Civic Responsibility

Student participation develops moral agency and justice orientation (Kohlberg, 1984; Flanagan & Gallay, 2014).

4.5 Emotional Development

Supportive environments foster empathy and emotional regulation (Malti & Ongley, 2014).

5. NEGATIVE DIMENSIONS

5.1 Inequality

Differential treatment creates perceptions of injustice (Apple, 2004; Gregory et al., 2021).

5.2 Authoritarian Discipline

Punitive systems reduce moral autonomy (Freire, 1970; Skiba et al., 2020).

5.3 Performance Pressure

Competition encourages dishonesty and weakens integrity (Syvertsen et al., 2018; Anderman & Maehr, 1994).

5.4 Peer Influence

Peer norms can reinforce aggression and reduce empathy (Bandura, 1977; Thornberg, 2021).

5.5 Curriculum Contradiction

Mismatch between formal and actual practice creates moral dissonance (Jackson, 1968; Rest, 1986).

6. ROLE OF TEACHERS AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Teachers act as primary moral models influencing student behavior (Bandura, 1977). Positive teacher-student relationships predict long-term moral development (Pianta et al., 2012).

School culture functions as a moral ecosystem shaping ethical behavior (Schein, 2017). Classroom management and peer interactions continuously transmit moral lessons through lived experience (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978).

7. ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Tarbiyyah

Tarbiyyah refers to holistic moral development through environment and relationships (Al-Attas, 1980; Halstead, 2019). It aligns closely with hidden curriculum.

Qur'anic Foundations

- “Great moral character” (Qur’an 68:4)
- “Best example” (Qur’an 33:21)

Hadith

Good and bad companionship strongly influence moral character (Al-Bukhari, 2002).

Islamic and Western perspectives converge on environmental and modeling-based moral learning, though Islamic thought includes spiritual dimensions.

8. DISCUSSION

Moral development is primarily shaped by lived experience rather than formal instruction. Students evaluate consistency between institutional values and practices. Peer culture is especially influential during adolescence.

Structural factors such as policy, assessment systems, and school organization are more influential than individual teacher behavior alone. Islamic and Western frameworks complement each other in explaining moral development.



9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers

- Model fairness, care, and integrity
- Use participatory teaching methods

Administration

- Ensure fairness and transparency
- Implement restorative discipline
- Regularly audit school culture

Policymakers

- Include moral and cultural indicators in quality systems
- Reduce overemphasis on exam-based evaluation

School Environment

- Improve physical and social environment
- Promote service learning

Peer Culture

- Implement mentoring and anti-bullying programs
- Encourage collaborative learning

Islamic Institutions

- Align institutional practice with Islamic values
- Focus on Tarbiyyah-based holistic development

10. CONCLUSION

Hidden curriculum plays a central role in shaping moral development through lived school experiences. Positive alignment between formal and hidden curriculum enhances moral reasoning and ethical behavior, while inconsistency weakens moral integrity. Integrating Islamic Tarbiyyah with Western psychological theories provides a comprehensive framework for moral education. Schools must intentionally design their hidden curriculum to support ethical and holistic student development.

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