

Beyond the Formal Syllabus: Exploring the Role of Hidden Curriculum in Youth Self-Actualization

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ABSTRACT

Maslow's hierarchy of needs fundamentally talks about the various needs that enable an individual's complete potential arrive, culminating in the peak of self-actualization. The idea suggested by the term "hidden curriculum" is now made clear in modern educational practices. It includes both academic lessons as well as co-curricular and extracurricular activities happening at the same time. A supportive educational setting can fulfill students' psychological needs by offering nutritious meals and addressing health and mental wellness issues. Different types of social interactions create a sense of security, incorporating anti-bullying strategies, equality, and peer relationships that contribute to a safe educational environment. When students work together to develop a shared set of values, norms, and empathy regarding personal growth, the hidden curriculum can boost their self-esteem. The implementation of the hidden curriculum within the institutional environment helps students identify their unique strengths and the areas that need improvement. Such diverse activities push them closer to achieving "self-actualization." Therefore, the hidden curriculum serves as a crucial component of the overall educational experience, aiding students in their journey to express their true selves. Using a qualitative research design, data is collected through semi-structured interviews among the Tezpur University students. Research findings suggest that the hidden curriculum has a substantial effect on self-awareness, independence, and realizing potential, aligning with Maslow's concept of self-actualization. The study highlights the necessity for educators to intentionally nurture positive hidden curriculum to promote comprehensive student development.

Keywords: *Hidden Curriculum, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Actualization, Youth*

The hierarchy of needs posits that the fundamental requirements of an individual are essential for attaining the apex of personal development, namely self-actualization. This theoretical framework serves as a foundational element in the study of motivational theories that pertain to physiological drives. It is typically depicted as a pyramid comprising five distinct tiers. Self-actualization constitutes a pivotal concept within the realm of humanistic psychology, delineating the journey toward the realization and fulfilment of one's inherent potential and capabilities. This concept has been extensively scrutinized and assessed in psychological scholarship, particularly in contexts pertaining to well-being, personal development, and motivation (Kaufman 2018). Each category of needs is intricately

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Beyond the Formal Syllabus: Exploring the Role of Hidden Curriculum in Youth Self-Actualization

interconnected with the others. A student who engages in communal dining with peers or shares their provisions with others addresses the physiological needs inherent to their experience. An environment characterized by safety and joy within educational institutions satisfies safety needs, thereby enabling enhanced focus on academic endeavours. Educators can cultivate a sense of community through collaborative activities, teamwork, and joint learning experiences, fostering feelings of love and acceptance among students within the educational setting. When students receive recognition and rewards for their accomplishments—whether in academic, artistic, or athletic domains—this serves to bolster their esteem needs. Upon achieving self-fulfilment, students ascend to the paramount level of self-actualization, thereby realizing their potential as human beings.

The fundamental components of self-actualization are enumerated as follows:

- **Autonomy:** The capacity to make independent decisions and regulate one's behaviour, indicative of self-direction and personal accountability (Jones et al., 1986; Wright et al., 1974; Shostrom, 1964).
- **Self-Acceptance:** A realistic and affirmative disposition toward oneself, encompassing acceptance of both strengths and limitations (Jones et al., 1986; Shostrom, 1964).
- **Purpose and Meaning:** The possession of clear objectives, a defined sense of direction, and the perception that life possesses intrinsic significance (Shostrom, 1964).
- **Creativity:** The ability to engage in original thought, solve problems, and embrace novel experiences (De Souza et al., 2024; Shostrom, 1964).
- **Authenticity:** There is no need of external expectations to live life fully. The harmony of life lies in one's true self, values, and beliefs (Shostrom, 1964).
- **Personal Growth:** An ongoing process dedicated to the development of one's abilities, talents, and potential (De Souza et al., 2024; Jones et al., 1986; Shostrom, 1964).
- **Positive Relationships:** Empathy and mutual respect are the key factors to establish a heartfelt connection with others (De Souza et al., 2024; Shostrom, 1964).
- **Peak Experiences:** Intermittent instances of profound joy, creativity, or fulfilment that contribute to a sense of transcendence and self-realization (Shostrom, 1964).

The philosophical ideas behind self-actualization theory come from many different sources, including humanistic, existential, mythical, and cross-cultural views (D'Souza et al., 2016; Kaufman, 2018; Geller, 1984). Even though Maslow's model is still widely used, there are ongoing discussions about its limitations and the importance of combining ideas from both Western and Eastern traditions to better understand human potential and fulfilment. The curriculum is a major part of education, and it helps shape the mind and overall growth of children based on their needs and the needs of society. The curriculum is the overall plan that schools follow. The unspoken rules and values in the curriculum teach students how to think, speak, and behave in ways that help them to achieve the all-round development.

Through the practice of hidden curriculum, a student makes his/her life more organised. The concept of hidden curriculum can be seen from different sociological perspectives. Where the socialist and functionalist supporters said that the practice of hidden curriculum is nothing more than that to maintain social norms, order while the liberal supporter sees it as a normal way to teach values and norms through schooling. On the other hand, the critical perspective sees the hidden curriculum as a way to reinforce existing social inequalities and promote ideas of social segregation among students. Adolescence is a time when self-awareness and self-esteem develop quickly. Schools can help build mutual respect, trust, values, behaviour,

and relationship between teachers and students to create a joyful learning environment. Schools have certain principles, goals, rules, and guidelines to help them organize activities such as creating and following an academic calendar, setting up evaluation methods, ensuring punctuality, organizing both academic and co-curricular activities, involvement in school matters, handling encouragement and punishment, and forming student groups. These elements play an crucial role in the personal development of students to become a promising youth.

Theoretical Framework:

There are good number of educational theories that explore the role of implicit learning, socialisation and moral development in the schools. Carl Rogers Humanistic theory stresses on the self-concept and growth- promoting environments. Social Learning Theory of Bandura (1977) emphasizes that individuals learn through observation. The practice of hidden curriculum conveys these messages through teacher role modelling, institutional norms and reinforcement patterns. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) supports that the existence of hidden curriculum within the microsystem of the school and is influenced by broader cultural, social, and educational policies. This theory helps to analyse how different levels of the school environment—classrooms, school policies (microsystem)and cultural expectations (macrosystem)—influence the development of human qualities in students.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Singh et.al (2025) in their article “*Abraham Maslow’s Theory in the Education Sector: A Study in Pune City*” analysed that school enhanced student’s focus and readiness to learn. Students motivation influenced teaching practices, learning environments and student development. **Sauri et.al** (2025) in their study “*Investigating Teacher performance in Character Building Students: a case study of teaching and learning at an elementary school in Indonesia*” mentioned that the right guidance, direction of motivation are educating students to maintain moral character in the school. **Amayreh** (2024) et.al in their paper “*Addressing job satisfaction factors in Jordan’s Public Schools: Integrating Maslow’s Hierarchy with self-determination theory*” claimed that foundational needs and intrinsic motivators could foster higher job satisfaction level. Secure environment, Cultural and systematic considerations enhanced engagement. **Kumari** (2024) in her study “*Humanism in Education: Fostering Student- Centred Learning Through Maslow’s and Roger’s Theories*” claimed that humanistic education should meet the well-being, dignity and self-actualization to make a self-directed individual. **Ma** (2024) in the study “*Analysis Learning Motivation from Internal and External Perspectives: Recommendations Based on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory*” stated that teachers should help their students to accept their value by applying the knowledge they had needed to survive. **Adamson et al.** (2024) in their study “*Exploring children’s experiences of schooling in Tanzania: how the hidden curriculum undermines aspirations for sustainable development*” stated that contribution of hidden curriculum powerfully shapes children’s experiences of real education. **Hardiyanto et.al** (2023) in their study “*Mathematical Communication Based on Maslow’s Theory: A study of learning motivation in Elementary School Students*” stated that each subject with high learning motivation tend to more have communication abilities. **Manik** (2023) in his study “*Student Character Building through Hidden Curriculum Based on Connectionism Theory*” examined that in addition to knowledge a teacher teaches student about value of life to build a strong character. Active communication is needed between schools and parents. The results showed that the implementation of the hidden curriculum had a influence on students. **Dar** (2022) et.al in their article “*Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is still relevant in the 21st Century*” stated that hierarchy of needs still relevant today’s era to meet our many demands rather than

as a set of orders. **Jain** (2022) in her study “*Malow’s Hierarchy of Needs in the Context of Online Education*” examined that students requirements varied according to their ages and gender that satisfy the different needs. **Gunawan** et al. (2018) in their study “*Hidden curriculum and its relationship with the student character building*” found the effect of the hidden curriculum on the student character building. **King-Hill** (2015) in her research article “*Critical Analysis of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need*” stated that some elements of the hierarchy of needs considered as a student-centred approach. That gave students a purposeful and joyous life. The author gave example of her own professional practice and experiences and discussed in the terms of the critique.

Rationale of the Study:

Hidden curriculum and Malow’s hierarchy of needs are interconnected. The hidden curriculum can reflect societal values and power dynamics which may affect the educational system and society at large. The ultimate aim of schools are to make its children responsible human being. Schools transform its students by providing knowledge, skills and values (Sergiovanni 1991). The theory was supported by Tay and Diener (2011) reaffirms its relevance by demonstrating how fulfilment of basic needs correlates with subjective well-being across cultures, indicating the theory's enduring applicability. Conceptually, self-actualization is comprehended as the realization of one’s personal potential and growth, embedded into humanistic psychology (Rogers, 1967) (Goldspink & Engward, 2018), while the hidden curriculum encompasses the unwritten institutional values, norms, and practices that shape student experiences beyond formal education (Nahardani et al., 2021) (Semper & Blasco, 2018). This theory was further explored by Zi-Huang et.al (2023) suggested that the fulfilling of needs through hierarchically are essential for an individual's overall well-being. Different UN entities gave different definitions of youth. In this study, the researcher tries to explore the experiences of university’s students and their impact on their later higher educational life. While the positive consequences of the hidden curriculum are recognized in professional education, its specific role in fostering self-actualization among youth remains under-researched. This study will try to Understand how hidden curriculum practices contribute to self-actualization.

Research Questions:

1. What types of hidden curriculum practices do youth experience within educational institutions?
2. In what ways do these hidden curricula practices influence the self-actualization of youth in terms of autonomy, confidence, creativity, and life purpose?
3. How do youth perceive the contribution of hidden curriculum to their personal, social, and emotional growth?
4. What institutional and interpersonal factors support or hinder the role of hidden curriculum in fostering self-actualization?
5. What strategies can educators and institutions adopt to effectively utilize hidden curriculum to enhance youth self-actualization?

Objectives:

1. To identify the hidden curriculum practices experienced by youth in educational institutions.
2. To explore how these hidden curriculum practices contribute to different dimensions of self-actualization such as autonomy, confidence, creativity, and personal purpose.
3. To examine youth perceptions regarding the influence of hidden curriculum on their personal, social, and emotional development.

Beyond the Formal Syllabus: Exploring the Role of Hidden Curriculum in Youth Self-Actualization

4. To investigate the institutional and interpersonal factors that facilitate or restrict self-actualization through hidden curriculum.
5. To propose educational strategies that utilize hidden curriculum positively to promote youth self-actualization.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The target population comprises youth aged 20–25 years enrolled in university i.e. Minimum one year of continuous experience in the institution. A sample of approximately 20 participants is selected to ensure diversity in gender, and institutional background is government from Tezpur Central University, Assam.

- **Sampling technique:** Purposive sampling, 4th semester M.A students Department of Education, Tezpur University.
- **Research Tools:** Semi- structured interview
- **Interview mode:** Face to face and online interviews (Google Meet) and interview duration was 20-25 minutes.

Semi-structured interview:

Section A: Background Information

1. Can you briefly tell me about your educational background and status (school/college/year of study)?

Section B: Experiences of Hidden Curriculum

2. When you think about your university experience, what are some important things you feel you learned outside the formal syllabus?

3. How do teachers' attitudes, behavior, or expectations influence how students behave or think in university?

4. Can you share examples where rules, discipline, or culture taught you something about how to act in society?

5. Are there any unwritten rules or norms in your institution that students usually follow even though they are not stated officially?

6. What roles do peer interactions and friendships play in shaping values, attitudes, and behavior in university?

7. Can you describe any experience where extracurricular activities or events taught your life lessons that formal classes did not?

Section C: Self-Actualization Indicators

8. How have these experiences helped you become more confident, responsible, or independent?

9. In what ways have hidden lessons or informal experiences influenced your goals, identity, or sense of purpose?

10. Can you describe a situation in university that made you realize your strengths, talents, or leadership skills?

11. How do hidden or informal learning experiences contribute to your personal growth (emotionally, socially, intellectually)?

Section D: Perceptions and Improvement

12. Do you feel all students have equal access to such informal learning opportunities? Why or why not?
13. What changes in university practices would help students develop their full potential beyond academics?

Probing Questions (use when needed)

- “Can you explain more about that?”
- “Can you give an example?”
- “How did that make you feel?”
- “Why do you think that happens?”

Closing

14. Is there anything else you would like to share about your learning experiences beyond formal curriculum?

Data Analysis:

1. To identify the hidden curriculum practices experienced by youth in educational institutions.

Theme	Category	Codes	Evidence (Verbatim from interviews)
1. Implicit Behavioural Expectations	Classroom conduct norms	Silence is valued as obedience	“If we ask many questions, teachers think we’re challenging them.”
	Respect hierarchy	Stand when teacher enters; no informal talk	“We must always agree with teachers even when we feel they’re wrong in some cases.”
2. Differential Teacher Attention & Expectations	Academic status bias	More opportunities for high achievers	“Only the toppers get to lead anything in research projects”
	Gender expectations	Boys lead; girls assist Safety- based restrictions	“Boys are chosen for leadership, girls for decorating.” “we have to enter hostel before 9.30 pm though we want to stay in library”
	Socio-economic influence	Ability to afford materials and technology	“Group projects become difficult because some of us don’t have personal laptops.”
3. Peer Norms & Social Grouping	Social identity	Popular vs. isolated students	“If you’re not fashionable, you’re ignored.”
	Peer pressure	Forced conformity	“We follow trends to avoid teasing.”
		Name calling, exclusion	

Beyond the Formal Syllabus: Exploring the Role of Hidden Curriculum in Youth Self-Actualization

	Bullying & labelling		“Some students make fun of accents, so we keep quiet.”
4. Reward & Recognition Priorities	Achievement focus Limited recognition for other talents Competitive culture	Academic ranks prized Sports/arts undervalued Best performers highlighted	“Stage prize is only for those who get 1st or 2nd rank.” “Drawing talents don’t matter unless they win awards outside.” “We feel only the smartest students matter in university .”
5. Access to Opportunities & Resources	Participation inequality Resource gaps Language privilege	Selection favouritism Technology/textbook disparities English speakers favoured	“Teachers choose the same students always for everything.” “We share textbooks while others have everything new.” “If your English is good, teachers listen more.”
6. Value Transmission through School Culture	Moral values Patriotism & rituals Authority structure	Gender sensitivity & equality Integrity in leadership Departmental programme Teachers unquestionable	“Workshop on sexual harassment and prevention teach us about consent, safety and gender respect.” “We can manage funds for departmental programme, reinforcing honesty and accountability.” “Attendance in programmes decide how good you are considered.” “We learn not to question elders no matter what.”

These findings strongly indicate that the practice of hidden curriculum is embedded into the institutional structure which are directly help youth to improve their behaviour, identity, confidence and aspirations.

2. To explore how these hidden curriculum practices contribute to different dimensions of self-actualization such as autonomy, confidence, creativity, and personal purpose.

Theme (Self-Actualization Dimension)	Category (Self-actualization Dimension)	Codes	Evidence
1. Leadership & Participation opportunities	Confidence Development Autonomy	Taking responsibility; Public speaking, leadership roles Decision making in group tasks	“When I was asked to lead morning assembly, I felt like I could achieve anything.” “Teachers trust me to take decisions for the team.”
2. Supportive teacher Expectations	Confidence Personal Purpose	Encouragement; recognition; trust Future aspiration guidance	“My teacher told me I have talent, so I tried harder.” “Because sir appreciated my writing, I want to be a writer.”
3. Peer collaboration & social belonging	Autonomy Identity & Confidence	Peer-led activities; Collective problem solving Friendship support; Being accepted	“We learn more from working together without teacher’s control.” “My friends motivate me to try new things, otherwise I stay quiet.”
4. Exposure to Diverse Experiences	Creativity Personal Purpose	Creativity- Art, music, sports Career exploration	“I feel most like myself during drama club.” “I discovered my interest in photography in University club.”
5. Value-based school culture	Personal purpose Confidence & identity	Learning ethics, social values Recognition of moral qualities	“Volunteering activities made me realize I want to help others.” “When teachers praise my behaviour, it boosts my confidence
6. Resource Access & equity challenges ((Negative Influence)	Reduced Autonomy & confidence Creativity Blocked	Restricted opportunities Limited exposure; Lack of encouragement	“I avoid contests because only well-off students get support.” “We have ideas, but no materials to make them real.”

These findings showed that hidden curriculum practices influence self-actualization in both positive and negative ways. Institution unintentionally become the place where a youth discover who they are -or who they are not allowed to be.

3. To examine youth perceptions regarding the influence of hidden curriculum on their personal, social, and emotional development.

Theme	Category (Development Dimension)	Codes	Evidence (Verbatim from interviews)
1. Sense of Identity and Self-Worth	Personal Development	Feeling valued; Self-recognition; Self-esteem changes Feeling inferior; Labelling	“When teachers appreciate me, I feel I am capable of achieving more.” “Students who struggle are treated like failures, so we stop trying.”
2. Peer influence and social belonging	Social development	Friendship support, inclusion, group acceptance Social comparison, exclusion	“Being part of my friend group gives me confidence to participate.” “If you don’t follow trends, you are ignored and left out.”
3. Emotional well-being and stress responses	Emotional Development	Pressure from academic ranking Positive emotions through recognition	“I always feel nervous because mistakes are judged harshly.” “When my artwork was displayed, I felt extremely happy and proud.”
4. Autonomy vs. control	Personal & emotional development	Opportunity to express ideas Restriction; Obedience	“Group tasks let us think freely and make our own choices.” “We can’t question to most of the teacher. It’s always teacher’s way.”
5. Culture and value learning	Social & personal development	Sustainability values Community engagement Academic integrity	“Campus recycling practices taught us more dutiful.” “NSS participation helped to learn us civic sense and the value of contributing to society.” “teachers discourage us copying during exams”
6. Recognition and achievement Norms	Personal & emotional development	Pride from success; Motivation Shame of failure; Anxiety over financial limitations	“Winning in the competitions makes me feel proud of myself.” “If we lose, teachers make us feel like we disappointed the department” “sometimes we feel anxious because to buy or attend books or workshop that others are joining.”

Beyond the Formal Syllabus: Exploring the Role of Hidden Curriculum in Youth Self-Actualization

Hidden curriculum empowers youth through support and opportunity, but can also damage self-worth through comparison, emotional distress, anxiety-based control, suppressed creativity.

4. To investigate the institutional and interpersonal factors that facilitate or restrict self-actualization through hidden curriculum.

Across the above mentioned themes, hidden curriculum employs a dual influence on youth's self-actualization.

Facilitators	Restrictions
1. Confidence	Anxiety
2. Autonomy	Self-doubt
3. Creativity	Conformity
4. Identity formation	Emotional stress
5. Personal purpose	Limited growth

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight that when hidden curriculum practices promote inclusivity, academic encouragement, ethical behavior, they create an environment for personal growth, autonomy and intrinsic motivation- key preconditions for self-actualization. The fear, anxiety, unsupportive relationships, discrimination create hindrances in the path of self-actualization. The main challenge for the society is to find a way to uphold essential values within a new, global and digital context. Students who develop self-actualization skills are better equipped to handle life challenges, set meaningful goals, and maintain good personalities, which empowers them to contribute to their communities. Extra-curricular and Co-curricular activities are the gateway to fulfil the desire outcome of hidden curriculum. Promoting a friendly campus culture to encourage students to foster self-expression and belonging. Universities should promote a reflective discussion on values, culture and institutional norms and also try to use feedback mechanism to monitor its effects. Achieving self-actualization through the hidden curriculum is about awakening to the game of life and choosing to play it by your own rules, even while understanding the official ones. We can't overlook the effect of our society and cultural background on our education system. These affects on young minds. University should conduct more seminars, webinars on youth empowerment. This is not an overnight event. It is the result of long-term efforts and perseverance of both teachers and students.

Implications:

1. Educational policies must prioritize equity—ensuring equal access to academic resources, personalized support, and inclusive learning environments.
2. Schools should adopt participatory pedagogies that encourage questioning, debate, and shared decision-making to nurture student agency.
3. A shift toward holistic assessment is needed—recognizing diverse talents, social skills, creativity, and well-being.

Recommendations:

1. Ensure equal access to academic resources and extracurricular programs.
2. Provide mentorship for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
3. Discourage streaming and seating arrangements that label or segregate students by academic performance and gender issues.

Beyond the Formal Syllabus: Exploring the Role of Hidden Curriculum in Youth Self-Actualization

4. Integrate hidden curriculum awareness into teacher education and professional development.
5. Encourage educators to reflect on biases in their expectations, feedback, and interaction patterns.
6. Conduct periodic training on inclusive teaching, gender neutrality, and culturally responsive pedagogy.
7. Create platforms such as student councils, feedback forums, and class meetings where students can freely express opinions.
8. Replace authoritarian discipline with restorative and dialogue-based approaches.
9. Reduce excessive dependence on examinations and ranking systems.
10. Incorporate culturally relevant content that reflects students' real-life contexts and local issues.
11. Promote mother tongue or regional languages alongside English to foster equal linguistic respect.
12. Encourage peer support systems that promote cooperation over competition.

Implementing these recommendations can shift the hidden curriculum from reinforcing social hierarchies to supporting inclusion, empowerment, and critical citizenship. Through collaborative efforts among teachers, administrators, parents, and policymakers, schools can become environments where every learner receives recognition, respect, and equal opportunities for success.

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Beyond the Formal Syllabus: Exploring the Role of Hidden Curriculum in Youth Self-Actualization

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