Article

# Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum in Nursing Education: Implications for Nursing Faculty

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## ABSTRACT

*The hidden curriculum in nursing education encompasses the unspoken norms, values, and expectations that shape student learning beyond the formal curriculum. This qualitative study explores how undergraduate nursing students at an HBCU experience the hidden curriculum during their first-semester courses. Using focus group discussions and a faculty survey, the study identified recurring themes, including pressure to appear confident, reluctance to ask questions, and reliance on modeling faculty behavior. Recommendations include faculty development in reflective teaching and the implementation of validated tools such as the Hidden Curriculum Assessment Scale in Nursing Education (HCAS-NE). Addressing the hidden curriculum is essential to fostering inclusive, transparent, and supportive learning environments that prepare nursing students for professional practice.*

## INTRODUCTION

In academia, faculty focus on curriculum development, assessment, and evaluation to ensure positive outcomes. In nursing education, faculty methodically teach nursing concepts, theories, trends, and clinical skills to students. However, some of the most transformative and often overlooked lessons learned by students do not come solely from lectures, textbooks, exams, and clinical experiences, but also from the hidden curriculum—the unspoken norms, values, and behavioral expectations absorbed through social interactions, institutional culture, and informal practices. The nursing

faculty at Morgan State University aimed to explore the concept of the hidden curriculum and its impact on nursing education by asking the question, how might acknowledging and addressing the hidden curriculum reshape the way we prepare future nurses for professional practice?

## METHODS

The faculty conducted two focus groups with undergraduate nursing students (14 students) to identify their experiences with the hidden curriculum, see the appendix. All students completed two first-semester nursing courses: Introduction to Professional Nursing (NURS 300) and Nursing Process and Health Assessment (NURS 301). The faculty asked eleven questions regarding general experiences and perceptions, the learning process and environment, student engagement and interactions, and navigating institutional norms and resources. The recurring themes that emerged amongst student responses throughout the discussion included pressures to appear confident, hesitation to ask questions, and modeling faculty behavior. A study conducted by Gonin (2023), "Unspoken Expectations 7 Student Success: Revealing the Hidden Curriculum," provided an evidence-based reference for question development.

Students enrolled in NURS 300 and NURS 301 nursing courses entered with positive expectations. Initial expectations of the nursing courses included learning fundamental nursing skills, understanding the correlation between nursing knowledge and practical skills, and gaining insights into the role of nurses compared to doctors. Student perceptions of unwritten rules for success in the courses highlighted the importance of adapting to different learning styles and paying attention in class. A student noted an unspoken participation rule, which led to the assumption that "we have to participate more in these classes than other classes." The group concurred with the unspoken rule of applying oneself more rigorously in these two courses than in other courses. Another student discussed the unspoken expectation that students should "answer questions even if they are wrong" while in class. This unspoken expectation further led to a discussion of student assumptions that faculty perceive students' nonverbal responses to questions as students "not knowing the content." The student continued to say, "I knew the answer. I just did not want to say it first." Upon evaluation of these general experience and perception responses, faculty may want to ask themselves: What unspoken expectations might I be communicating through my language, grading, or classroom behaviors? Are my expectations for participation clearly stated, or are they assumed to be understood?

Students identified concepts taught towards the end of the semester as challenging due to scheduling and holidays. Students expressed the need to "link concepts between the two courses" and the unspoken expectation that prior knowledge obtained in general education or other concurrent nursing courses should assist with understanding concepts. A student stated that a faculty member said, "You should know this already," yet the student was on a different pathway within the nursing program from their peers and had not taken the pharmacology course. In preparation for in-class learning activities and discussions, students completed pre-class assignments and utilized resources outside of the class (Quizlet and YouTube).

The unwritten rule that students perceived as confusing or challenging regarding resources was addressed by a student as "online resources are unreliable." This unwritten rule was confusing for some students, as faculty use these resources as in-class learning tools. Further questions for faculty to consider when evaluating hidden curriculum learning experiences include: How do I address gaps in foundational knowledge without assuming prior learning? Do I explicitly model how to evaluate and use online tools and resources effectively and critically? Do I provide opportunities for students to discuss what study strategies or resources they find helpful and validate diverse learning approaches?

Formal and informal values and norms structure the culture and environment of nursing education. Students adhere to a strict uniform policy as modeled by faculty; however, the unspoken rule is that they modify their uniforms to align with the preferences of individual clinical instructors. Students also described navigating unwritten rules, such as "all nurses act a certain way." Faculty and peer interactions throughout the semester influenced student perceptions. One student expressed their perception of a professional nurse by silently internalizing the norms of "what a good nurse should be," as demonstrated through the behaviors of multiple nursing faculty. This experience created a positive image of professional nursing. These expectations shaped professional identity and emotional resilience, which fostered growth for some and self-doubt for others. As faculty examine their role in the hidden curriculum and its impact on students' professional identity, they may want to consider asking: How might my interactions—both verbal and nonverbal—contribute to a student's confidence or self-doubt? What steps can I take to make implicit expectations more transparent and inclusive for all learners? How do I support students in developing their professional identity while acknowledging the diversity of nursing pathways?

Students acknowledged interactions with faculty and peers as "important for success" in both courses; however, one student stated, "We only had one activity in class to get to know our classmates on the first day." Faculty provided virtual and in-person meeting times for mentoring and advising. Students highlighted collaborative learning experiences during group projects, simulation, skills practice, and clinical experiences. The group discussion emphasized positive experiences with role-playing during in-class activities. Students perceived faculty as empathetic, as evidenced by questions such as "What is your learning style?" or "Do you have an individualized study plan?" There was an ordinary student perception of an unspoken expectation that students should understand group dynamics. Comments from faculty such as "follow the rubric for group instructions" or "divide the work" did not provide instruction for group dynamics. To best support student engagement and interactions, faculty may ask themselves: How do I demonstrate empathy and support beyond academic performance? Do I provide multiple opportunities for students to get to know each other? Do I assume students already know how to collaborate effectively, or do I teach teamwork skills intentionally? Is group work in my course designed primarily for content mastery or also to develop essential professional competencies, such as communication, leadership, and accountability?

**Faculty Survey**

In a survey, first-year nursing faculty were asked, "How do they currently address the hidden curriculum?" Nine full-time nursing faculty members who work in the first-semester nursing courses participated in the survey. Most faculty members cited strategies such as classroom discussions, student debriefs, role modeling, and reflective journaling as practical approaches. Encouragingly, these results reflect a growing awareness of this dynamic. While these are effective strategies for addressing the hidden curriculum and collecting data, not all faculty members are knowledgeable about how to evaluate that data. Faculty identified the need for a framework or process to assess elements of the hidden curriculum systematically. Course evaluation tools often fail to ask students specific questions that inquire about and gather their perspectives on the hidden curriculum. Course evaluation questions often include statements such as "any additional comments," which students tend to exclude.

Focus group transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Two researchers independently coded the qualitative data, identified recurring patterns, and resolved discrepancies through discussion to ensure credibility. Survey data were reviewed using descriptive summary analysis, and all responses were anonymized to maintain confidentiality. This dual-coding and validation process enhanced the rigor and transparency of the study, aligning with best practices in qualitative nursing education research.

Hafferty (1998) first defined the hidden curriculum in medical education as the hidden messages communicated through institutional routines, not official curricula. In nursing, students often learn lessons on hierarchy, communication style, self-sacrifice, and conflict avoidance without being consciously aware of it. Raso et al. (2019) and Abbaspour et al. (2022) identified that the hidden curriculum can lead to either emotional burnout or enhanced empathy, depending on how it is experienced and supported. Abbaspour et al. (2022) confirm that hidden curriculum can drive personal growth while boosting self-confidence, autonomy, and professional identity.

Hosseini et al. (2023) conducted a scoping review of studies published from 2017 to 2022 to identify strategies to improve the hidden curriculum. Although most studies focused on medical education, priority strategies emerged for nursing programs, including orienting faculty and students to hidden curriculum concepts, incorporating case-based workshops and team-based rotations, and comprehensive curriculum redesign. Another recent study conducted in China (Chen et al., 2024) introduced the Hidden Curriculum Assessment Scale in Nursing Education (HCASNE) and demonstrated strong psychometric properties (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.97$). The HCAS-NE tool enables educators to systematically assess students' perceptions of school climate, professional behaviors, and peer interactions. Implementing the HCAS-NE tool may provide a valuable opportunity to uncover the hidden curriculum and translate it into actionable insights.

## IMPLICATIONS

Addressing the hidden curriculum aligns with Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, which emphasizes reflection as a pathway to perspective transformation and

professional identity development. By encouraging students to reflect on unspoken norms critically, faculty can facilitate deeper learning that transforms implicit assumptions into explicit understanding. Similarly, Benner's Novice to Expert framework underscores how modeling, guided reflection, and feedback help novice learners internalize professional values and behaviors. Intentional reflection and faculty role modeling thus serve as bridges between the hidden curriculum and the development of competent, compassionate, and self-aware nursing professionals.

Institutions are encouraged to offer professional development (PD) opportunities for nursing faculty, providing training in reflective teaching, cultural humility, and equity-oriented pedagogy, along with protected time for reflective practice. PD opportunities will inspire faculty to create space for open discussions among students and among faculty to address hidden messages, tensions, and mismatches between ideals and practice. Consider designing intentional experiences, such as use-case-based discussions, mentorship, and collaborative clinical placements, to model professional norms and healthy coping mechanisms. Provide more opportunities for students to explore and discuss the hidden curriculum and its influence on their learning experiences and the formation of their professional identity. These strategies, when paired with the adoption of a reliable measurement tool such as the HCAS-NE, will help gather valid, actionable data on hidden curriculum dynamics.

## DISCUSSION

The hidden curriculum is neither inherently negative nor inherently positive in nursing education. It reflects the culture of nursing education in action from the student's perspective. However, when unexamined, it can weaken the values, advocacy, and professionalism that faculty strive to instill in our students. Faculty are already implementing strategies to bring the hidden curriculum dynamics to light, as shown in the survey results. Now, the challenge lies in increasing student and faculty awareness, institutionalizing an evaluation process, supporting it with training and time, and making hidden curriculum dynamics evident. The future of nursing depends not only on what we teach but on what we demonstrate, discuss, and reflect on together. We should continue to ask: how might acknowledging and addressing the hidden curriculum reshape the way we prepare future nurses for professional practice?

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**Appendix: Focus Group Questions:**

General experiences and perceptions
What did you hope to experience when you first started the course?
 Describe any unwritten rules about succeeding in the course.
 What are some unspoken expectations about how you should participate?
The Learning Process and Environment
 Are there any concepts or topics discussed in the course that you found confusing? If so, why?
 How do you prepare for specific activities such as lectures, discussions, and/or labs?
 Discuss your comfort with asking questions or seeking clarification in class.
Student Engagement and Interactions
 How well do you think your instructors understood your interests, concerns, and challenges?
 How did you navigate unwritten rules related to group work or collaboration with your peers?
 Were there any activities or interactions in class that helped you get to know your classmates or Instructors better?
Navigating Institutional Norms and Resources
 What, if anything, did you learn about accessing support services related to the course?
 What resources do you wish you had known about earlier in the course that would have made navigating the course easier?
Note: In preparing this manuscript, we used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for content creation.