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FEATURE

**Principals' Perspectives on the Influence
of the Hidden Curriculum on
Children's School Development**

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Abstract: *Today in the field of education, there is no unified, constant theory of the hidden curriculum of children's school development. Attempts to shed light on this issue are fragmentary and explain just some elements of this concept. The purpose of this study is to investigate the broader concept of the hidden curriculum and its effect on children's school development. Principals hold the main responsibility for a school, so it is reasonable to examine the concept of the hidden curriculum from the principal's perspectives. This study analyzed data from interviews with six principals who worked in different countries. Content analysis was used to analyze the data, and to identify the components of the concept of the school's hidden curriculum which influences a child's school development. The study concludes that there are two main components which constitute the hidden curriculum: the influence of people, and the influence of the school setting. The study also found that the absence or presence of cognitive dissonance in a child's development and the child's psychological needs were influenced by the hidden curriculum. It was found that all the components of the concept of the hidden curriculum were related to each other and were dependent on one another.*

Keywords: *hidden curriculum; satisfaction students' psychological needs within the school; cognitive dissonance in the students' minds; people' influence; school settings influence.*

There are two major factors which are different in nature but have a direct influence on a child's school development: the written curriculum and the hidden curriculum. The written curriculum is defined as "a document that lists what you teach and provides a rationale for why you teach these things" (McCall & Craft, 2000, p. 59). The hidden curriculum does not have an easy formal definition, because the hidden curriculum is "usually caught rather than intentionally taught" (Shaw 2006, p. 25). Kentli (2009) claims that the hidden curriculum is characterized by "an informality and lack of conscious planning" but it is still influential to the process of students' development (p. 83). That is one of the reasons why an educator should be focused on both of these kinds of curricula. Anderson (1992) recommends that for good education, we need to focus on "the physical structure, the fundamental knowledge, and the hidden curriculum" (p. 21). Frequently, however, educators focus on the first and second components of physical structure or basic knowledge, and ignore the hidden curriculum. Physical structure includes buildings and facilities which provide a place for education. Fundamental knowledge is covered by the written curriculum. The hidden curriculum may be considered by educators to be something which should follow the written and planned curriculum, however, rarely is such a process observed. More attention needs to be paid to the hidden curriculum—it needs to be studied and written about—in order to "to make explicit and visible what was formally invisible" (Anderson 2001, p. 1). This paper discusses the nature of the concept of the hidden curriculum from the perspective of the school principal.

Schools are about the education of children. But what goes on in schools depends heavily on people who are in charge of the management of schools: the principals and administrators. According to Fridell and Alexander (2005), educational leaders should be able to manage the learning environment by the ability "to handle problems, promote an environment where all are treated with respect, and create conditions that motivate others to be responsible and strive for success" (p. 7). In other words, principals and administrators should be able to create an environment where both teachers and students can experience a learning atmosphere that encourages the achievement of educational goals and positive development in the school. Educational leaders should have a vision of school development, which is "cooperatively developed with and communicated to all concerned (students, educators, parents, and patrons). This provides a strong motivation because the vision is based on shared values" (Fridell & Alexander, p. 6). The connection between educational leaders and teachers develops an educational authority which is responsible for the implementation of the hidden curriculum, as well as for its design (Mullen, Greenlee, & Bruner, 2005, p. 10).

It is important for educators (that includes administrators, teachers and parents) to have a clear complete vision about the concept of the hidden

curriculum in the child's school development. Unfortunately, the hidden curriculum has frequently been studied in a piecemeal fashion, where "every theorist has taken an important point into consideration" (Kentli 2009, p.88). Each study has focused on just a few components and this has not led to a clear understanding of the whole concept. Perhaps, it is a reason why educators "fail to realize the power of the hidden curriculum" (Phillips, 2008). This failure to see the whole picture of the school's hidden curriculum is the concern of this research.

The goal of this study was to elucidate the components of the entire concept of the hidden curriculum from the perspective of the principal. Principals are the educators who are responsible for managing and organizing schools in a way that will positively influence child development. But what are the factors that influence development besides the written and the taught curriculum? How does this happen? How can we make the hidden curriculum less hidden, so we can understand how it influences children's school development?

Related Studies

The debates about the importance of the hidden curriculum and about its components have been going on for almost half a century. Kentli (2009) summarizes the observations of different studies (Jackson, 1968; Dreeben, 1968; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977; Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1982; Giroux, 1983) by stating that the hidden curriculum includes "unspoken messages to students about values, attitudes and principles" (p. 86) He explains that attitudes and principles can be shown through the relationships between the teachers and students. No primary studies were found about principals and the concept of the hidden curriculum. But there were some studies which can be related to the main responsibilities of principals and their influence on school improvement and development.

One Swedish study (Torsen, 2009) explored the work of successful principals. The main objective was to understand what the successful principals do to make their schools function so well. Torsen (2009) suggests that successful principals (which means successful schools) have a strong ideology underlying the curriculum and there is good cooperation between principals and teachers. Torsen's (2009) research used data from 24 secondary schools in different districts. This study underlines the principal's influence on the teaching and learning process. The author calls it "a leadership involved in the core process of schooling through creating an infrastructure conducive both to teachers' work with teaching and learning and to student learning and outcomes" (Torsen, 2009, p. 51). Collaborative work between principals and teachers toward the same goals was found to be one of the most important components for successful schooling. Results showed that the schools where

principals were not involved in the schooling process in terms of teaching and learning processes were not successful and students' outcomes were much lower compared to the schools where principals were especially concerned about the teaching and learning processes (Torsen, 2009, p. 52).

The leadership that creates good schools depends on the principal at various levels. One recent study claims that the "effectiveness of the schools in educating students is highly dependent upon the presence and nature of multi-level leadership within the individual school." (MacNeill, Cavanagh & Silcox, 2003, p. 3). The authors suggest that the principals' leadership should be "formal and informal" to be able to provide and encourage a good level of teaching and learning, and good outcomes (p. 3). In other words, the principal should not just instruct, but should participate fully in school life. Principals' behavior and attitudes toward teachers and students creates a specific atmosphere and climate which nourishes the teaching and learning process. In another study, MacNeill et al. (2003) suggest that today we have a need for pedagogical leadership rather than instructional leadership. Pedagogy "acknowledges aspects of learning that were previously described as the "hidden curriculum" because "pedagogy peels back the veneer of teaching methodology to expose the conscious and unconscious decisions made by school leaders as agents of enculturation" (p. 5). The nature of the principal's leadership within the school directly influences student's outcomes and teachers' methods of teaching (p. 9).

One of the components of the hidden curriculum is a focus on the values which the schooling process should implement and develop. One major requirement in order to provide a setting where values can be developed is good communication between school leaders and all those who belongs to the schooling process (Andrew, Parks & Nelson, 1985). Andrew et al. (1985) urge school leaders to "communicate to those reporting to them that it is their responsibility to understand the value system and needs of various constituencies and to communicate organizational goals and needs" (p. 17). They explain that the way to develop clear institutional values "is not telling people what to do, it is involving them in determining goals and needs and obtaining a consensus" (p. 17). This suggests that principals are responsible for listening and finding out how the values system within the school works, but they cannot operate alone; there must be two-way communication with teachers, students and parents.

The need for good communication skills on the principals' side has tremendously increased because of the changes in the hierarchical structure in the school. We are using the same terminology for our educational leaders, but their role within the school has changed. The current need has been described as for a "decentralizing force in schools" (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 2007, p. 21). Schools are considered as communities where each member is committed to

common a purpose (Leithwood et al., 2007, p. 24). This means that principals are directly responsible for the socialization process of schooling which depends on the net relationships between themselves, the teachers, and the students.

These qualitative studies have attempted to clarify the components of the hidden curriculum from the educational leaders' perspective, even though they supposedly already know how to organize schooling in order to enhance the development of students' mental, physical and emotional abilities. These studies have helped to clarify the components of the hidden curriculum, however, there is still a lot of work to be done.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study. Content analysis was used to discover the main components of the hidden curriculum concept, according to the principals, and its influence on children's school development. Content analysis "classifies textual material, reducing it to more relevant, manageable bits of data," and is a means of reducing text into content categories (Weber, 1990, p. 5).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six principals in order to get "detailed information about a person's thoughts and behavior or . . . to explore new issues in depth (Boyes & Neale, 2006, p. 3). Each of the six principals was from a different country and a different culture. Most of them had worked for around 10 years as educational leaders. Each interview session lasted 20-30 minutes, and was recorded and fully transcribed.

In order to avoid concerns about the participants attempting to prove that something was important or workable, the words "hidden curriculum" were not used in the questions which were asked (see Boyes & Neale, 2006). The main questions were about components which affect children's school development outside the written and taught curriculum.

Data Analysis

All the participants seemed happy to be interviewed, and gave broad, extensive, and deep explanations. Each of the interviewees gave one or two examples during the interview session to enrich his/her point of view about the questions which were asked. It was a positive experience for both interviewer and interviewees.

Four major themes emerged from the content analysis: the influence of people and of the school setting, satisfying children's basic psychological needs at school, and the absence or presence of cognitive dissonance in students' minds. These will be examined below.

The Influence of People

All of the participants underlined the influence of people as the most significant component of the hidden curriculum. They emphasized that the relationships among people in the school played a great role in child's school experience. The "influence of people" was separated into the five subgroups of individuals which play a role in the school's hidden curriculum and their influence on child development.

Wherever the child sees a significant person in his life it can be a great influence. It can be a classroom teacher or another teacher, principal or other adult or person in the school. The child can connect with that person.... Everything that this person does has a tremendous influence. It goes far beyond what that person says. It is really about what that person is. (Participant 1)

The influence of teachers. Teachers were mentioned by all six interviewees, who said they play a key role in the concept of the hidden curriculum. Participants said that to have a good impact on the child's school development, the teacher should have methods of teaching which encourage students' thinking abilities:

Development depends on what kind of assignments children do—do the assignments make them think? (Participant 3)

We should allow children to express themselves. . . . The method of teaching is very influential. Let them do things they enjoy, such as brainstorming, etc. Encourage them to do their best. (Participant 6)

The participants cited teacher interaction with students in classroom activities and outside the classroom as an important component of the hidden curriculum, and one which influences children's development. They said that the teacher should be a part of the curriculum activities and his/her role included not only classroom activities, but it went far beyond.

He/she should not just teach but be a part of activities. The teacher can awaken the interest of the children about everything. (Participant 1)

It could be a physical education class in the fresh air where teacher interacts with the children when they are playing. (Participant 2)

You teach in the class and you are responsible for your class. But, how about the other children in the school? A teacher is assigned to all the school not just to one class. (Participant 4)

One of the biggest influences on a child's school development which was underscored by the interviewees was the teacher's treatment of the students in terms of caring. If the teacher is interested in the child's development he/she should also care about the child's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual

growth. Teacher attitudes toward students contribute to the formation of the child's attitudes toward people, friends, school, and life. This was seen as very important.

How a teacher treats students, particularly in terms of caring. Three things are very important. . . What the child sees, what the child hears, what the child feels. (Participant 1)

Several participants talked about the teacher's abilities to control their emotions in response to students' behavior and the proper reaction to the students' acts as an important component in the hidden curriculum. One interviewee insisted that the teacher's ability to be respectful toward the students and to be able to control his/her emotions is vital and influences the children.

If a teacher is not pleased and cannot express anger appropriately, that has a big impact on a child's development. (Participant 2)

The main problem is how we react to students' behavior and how we deal with students problems. (Participant 6)

The teacher should be aware that all the actions—even the way we greet the children— influences them. We should respect our children. If once that will crash, to develop it again will take a long time and it will be very difficult. (Participant 4)

Figure 1 summarizes the main components which are important in the school's hidden curriculum and depend on the teacher's influence. These include methods of teaching, interaction with students, caring, and emotional control.

Another group that needs to be mentioned is workers and staff. This group of people was mentioned by several participants as one which has an effect on children's development at school. Mostly this group was mentioned in the relationships to other subgroups. These are: teachers' influence, administrators' influence and peers' influence. The interaction among these groups has a particular influence on a child's school development.

The influence of administrators. Interview participants focused on the administrator's role as one which is included in the concept of the hidden curriculum and can influence a child's school development.

How principals deal with the whole population. . . . This aspect influences child development in the school. (Participant 6)

Administrators should find out the time to teach teachers how to be emotionally stable, and how to teach children to manage emotional problems. (Participant 5)

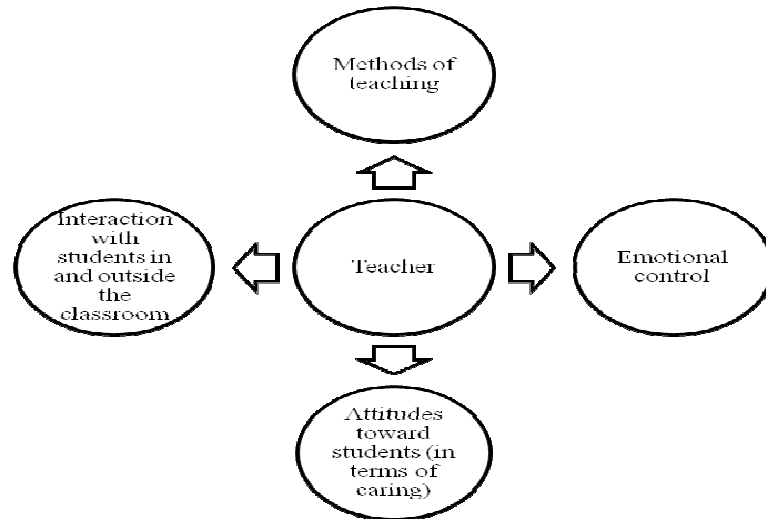


Figure 1. The influence of teachers.

Mostly, administrators' influence was described in terms of the relationships among teachers and other workers in the school. According to the interviewees, administrators are responsible for connecting all the components of the hidden curriculum properly. Good connections in terms of relationships among adults and between adults and children influence children very much. Participants also talked about the importance of administrators' awareness of teachers' abilities to overcome emotional problems during the interaction with students. Figure 2 shows principals' and administrators' influence on the school's child's development through the school's hidden curriculum.

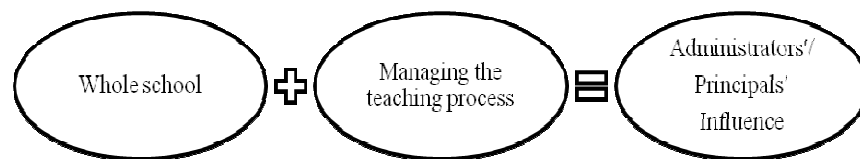


Figure 2. The influence of administrators.

Peer influence. Several participants mentioned peer influence as one of the components in the concept of the hidden curriculum. Peer influence was explained in terms of attitudes toward what the school is teaching, is doing for students, and how the school reacts to students' relationships and behavior. Children like to express their attitudes toward school among their classmates. Also children's interactions are an influence on every child's school development.

Each one of them has something unique to say, and they are learning from each other. (Participant 6)

"Put downs" from peers can be a negative influence. (Participant 2)

Family influence. Interview participants stated that the school should have a strong connection with families. This can help to have shared goals and a clear vision about the child's school development. This component is mentioned as one which created a concept of the hidden curriculum in the school. According to the participants, child's school development often depends on the family atmosphere and climate. School and family should work together in a cooperative manner in order to foster a child's development. Some participants gave examples how to create a connection between school and families.

How important is child's development for family? Do they value things which are important? (Participant 3)

We invite parents to participate in a nutrition week. This act is an effort to make a connection between school and family. (Participant 5)

The Influence of the School Setting

The school environment—physical and spiritual—tells much about the school culture and creates a particular atmosphere in the school. Interviewees explained that the school building and all the facilities and equipment reflected the school's hidden curriculum. A school which tries to care about children will concentrate on the school culture, which is reflected in the school's discipline, and the school's rules. The condition of the classroom equipment and school's facilities also describes the school's efforts to take care of the students' development. According to one elementary principal (Berry 2002), "there is a clear link between environmental quality of schools and educational performance" (p. 1). A school's building should be in a healthy condition in terms of protection from noise, provide a clean physical environment, enough light for studying, and space for students and teachers to be comfortable. How clean the school is, how it smells, and how it sounds affects the hidden curriculum. According to the participants' opinions this category strongly depends on the previous one: the influence of people. Administrators, teachers, staff and parents can create a school atmosphere which includes physical and

spiritual elements and students will enjoy it or reject it. It depends on the components of the hidden curriculum and their connections with each other.

The climate of the institution . . . as children step on to the campus what is going on? Is the discipline important? Is the language which is used in the institute important? (Participant 3)

Children need to have breaks and run around. A place for playing. . . . Fresh air is very important for them. Within the classroom should be a free flow of air to keep children's brains fresh and healthy. There should be enough space for children in the classroom to feel comfortable. . . . There should be enough light in the classroom. (Participant 6)

Figure 3 shows the elements which includes how the school settings influence the child's development in the school.

Satisfaction of Children's Basic Psychological Needs

This category shows how the schooling process, working through the components of the hidden curriculum, influences child's school development. The result of content analysis shows that the interactions of all previous components are responsible to satisfy a child's basic psychological needs. The respondents defined the student's psychological needs in terms of belonging, safety, acceptance, care and love as needs that should be accommodated in the school. The two previously mentioned categories (the influence of people and the influence school settings) should accomplish this for students.

Does a child feel acceptance, does a child feel love, and does a child feel himself as a part of what is going on inside the school?. (Participant 2)

Also, do students feel that they belong to that particular school? If they feel that they belong they are proud of this. Also, how safe is our place? (Participant 3)

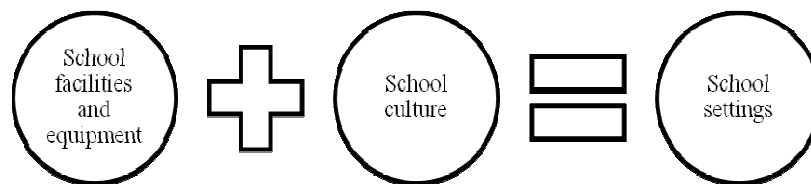


Figure 3. The influence of the school setting.

According to our study it seems like the level of satisfaction of students' psychological needs can have an impact on the hidden curriculum in the particular school. Sava concluded that teachers' attitude is strongly related to the students' psychological well-being in terms of acceptance, care and encouragement (as cited in Sahak & Ahmad, 2009, p.56). Aluede (2004) explains this interaction by saying that "psychological maltreatment thwarts or acts as a direct attack on the basic psychological, safety, love and belonging and self-esteem needs," and these have a negative influence on a child's development within the school (p. 268). A teacher's method of teaching has a huge impact on the students' psychological needs. How a teacher treats them, how she/he shows respect toward them is part of the hidden curriculum. But Aluede (2004) discusses not only the teacher's attitude, but also student interaction as one of the strong effects on student development in the school. According to the participants' responses, the connection between these various components of the school's hidden curriculum can affect students' overall development.

Cognitive Dissonance

Along with the satisfaction of children's basic psychological needs, the absence of cognitive dissonance helps us to understand the process of the hidden curriculum in the school and its major impact on student development. According to Cooper (2007), cognitive dissonance is considered "part of unfolding human development" (p. 87). Festinger says that "inconsistency" is a root of cognitive dissonance (as cited in Cooper, 2007, p. 4). Maertz, Hassan and Magnusson (2009) defined the theory of cognitive dissonance as "inconsistency between two cognitions, or between behavior and some cognition" (p. 68). This situation makes an impact on students' development through either discordance or harmony between values and real life, words and acts. In our case it means that when the children see something within the school which is in contradiction to the values which this school is preaching or to the mission of the school they have a cognitive dissonance. In a simple way the presence of cognitive dissonance is seen in the existence of double standards in the school. It is a conflict between saying and doing. This situation can cause wrong feelings as well as misunderstandings about everything, moreover "condoning an inconsistent behavior may constitute a threat to the self-concept as well" (Maertz et al., 2009, p. 69). Interviewees described cognitive dissonance as an important indicator of the positive or negative effects of the hidden curriculum. They emphasized that interaction among the components of the hidden curriculum influences this category very much.

We may read a Bible, we may pray, but do we practice the principles from the Bible? Also, principles should not be in conflict with physical activities in the school. How is Christianity seen during the break time? During the social gathering? Not only during the church time. (Participant 3)

I think students will see the lives of the school's leaders. When it is parallel between what is taught and the school's leaders' principles . . . that will influence them a lot. I believe that actions speak louder than words. Where there is a connection between what you teach and what real life is . . . very soon you will observe a different attitude toward life from the students. (Participant 4)

What we speak and what we do are most effective to children. (Participant 5)

We like role models. They look at us. They are comparing what they see with what they hear. (Participant 6)

Three things are very important. What a child sees, what a child hears and what a child feels. These three should be together. They make each other work well. (Participant 1)

Figure 4 shows the main components of the hidden curriculum which are influenced by the groups mentioned previously, and form the main factors affecting a child's school development.

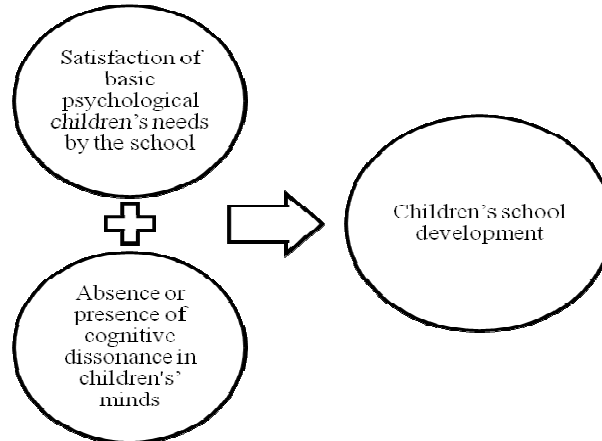


Figure 4. Categories which influence children's school development.

Conclusion

The hidden curriculum is a complex element of schooling which influences children's emotions and attitudes toward school. This particular study can give us only an idea of the concept of hidden curriculum in the school and its effects on children's development. But if we take a broader look at this concept we may find other components and different effects because in my opinion the concept of the hidden curriculum has a powerful influence.

In this study, the main components of the hidden curriculum were found to be the influence of people, and the influence of the school setting, which is also affected by people. Figure 5 depicts the main components of the school's hidden curriculum and the relationships between them, as suggested by the results of this study. The key players are administrators/principals, teachers, workers, parents and children and the school setting. Each of them is responsible for a particular part in this concept. For example, principals are responsible for organizing relationships between all the components. In addition, principals have a special responsibility concerning the school's culture and school physical facilities. Teachers have a central role because they are spending most of the school's time with children. Their attitudes toward the students are a key component in the concept of hidden curriculum. Children interact in the school according to the family background and school culture and this should also be noted as a component of the hidden curriculum.

A better understanding of the influence of the hidden curriculum shows the importance of relationships. Administrators must concentrate on relationships between adults and students in the school. Teachers need to adjust their teaching methods and their attitudes toward each other and toward the students. Parents need to better comprehend the things which shape a child's understanding of life.

Student development is affected by the hidden curriculum, and cognitive dissonance can be caused by adults' and peers' behavior which does not match their words. This creates confusion within the students' minds at a time when they are just beginning to understand life and develop rules for life. Words should be in line with actions and feelings. This suggests that the hidden curriculum can be developed, reorganized, and utilized for good. Research in this area should be continued, with special interest in comparing the hidden curriculum with student performance.

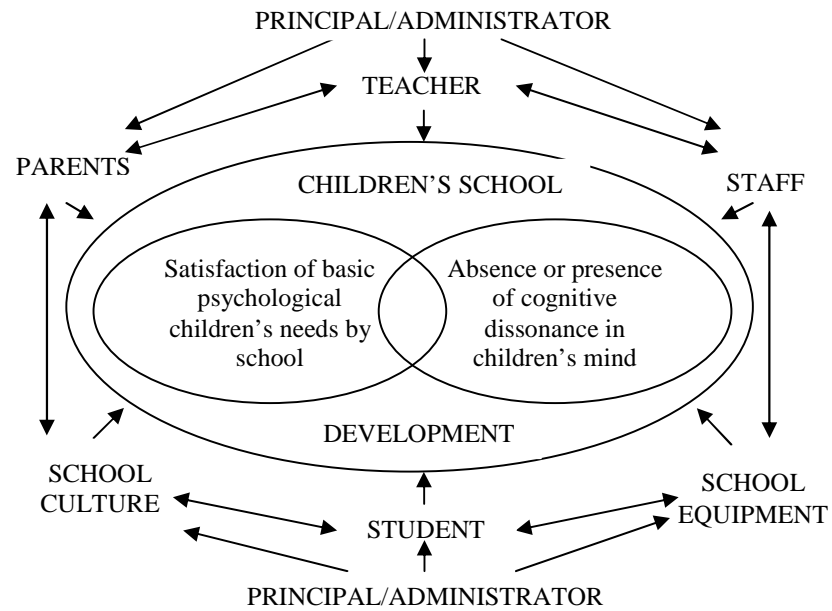


Figure 5. Theoretical framework of the school's hidden curriculum and its influence on children's school development from the principals' perspective.

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