

The Hidden Curriculum of a Special Education Program in a Junior Science College in Malaysia

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the facets of the hidden curriculum in a Junior Science College from the perspective of students labelled as gifted. This college is set up specifically for gifted and high academic achiever students. A qualitative approach was chosen to gather the data from former students and current teachers of this college. The data was collected from three focus group interviews with 16 former students, individual interviews with four students and 6 teachers, observations of school activities and document reviews. The data was analysed manually, codes and categories were identified and a rich description based on the categories was written to answer the research question. The results showed that the hidden curriculum is the result of the practices, procedures, rules, relationships, structures and physical characteristics of the Special Education Program (SEP). Eight themes were identified which resulted in the learning of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. The study concluded that the hidden curriculum facilitated the transmission of social norms while the learning improved positive interpersonal and intrapersonal skills in the students, in spite of the restrictive nature of the special education program. According to the results, it can be concluded that flexibility and creativity in instruction promotes positive traits in students and teachers.

Key words: Special education program, hidden curriculum, gifted students, flexibility, interpersonal

INTRODUCTION

Schooling is an undertaking to prepare the child for the future. A school-going child spends most of his/her time in formal education in the classrooms. In addition, he/she also attends extracurricular activities after formal classroom sessions. However, it can be noted that a large amount of school time is actually spent in social interaction with peers and adults in the school community than in a planned classroom environment. As such, it is important to consider what students learn in the social interaction in the school community.

Dewey (1997) maintained that collateral learning involving formation of enduring attitudes of likes and dislikes may be more important compared to the spelling lesson. In addition, he stated What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul?.

Therefore, educators need to ensure that the schooling experience can develop the capability to contribute in some meaningful way to humanity. The curriculum should offer different forms of knowledge and evaluation to determine the learning outcomes (Eisner, 1978). To meet the needs of high ability students, good

academic development must be balanced with good attitude and behaviours. These high potential students would require a special education program that will be able to challenge and develop them into better individuals.

The Special Education Program is differentiated from the regular curriculum experience through acceleration, compacting, deepening and broadening of the scope of the academic experience based on the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli and Reis, 2000). The main academic subjects are compacted and accelerated to provide time for enrichment. Reis *et al.* (1992) proposed providing compacted subjects only to students who have mastered or are capable of mastering.

Junior Science College (JSC) provides learning facilities for bright students in boarding schools throughout Malaysia. JSC aims to produce well-rounded students who are excellent in science and technology have a good personality with harmonious dimensions of mind, body, soul and emotion besides having a sense of entrepreneurship. The student as an individual needs to develop their personality in a harmonies manner as proposed the National Education Philosophy. JSC students should also be steadfast in their faith and have the capability to exalt themselves and the environment.

The special education under the Ministry of Education has implemented several policies for the gifted students. The first one, the Express Class System implemented from 1962 to the early 1970s, recognized the need for a special treatment of gifted students. Students who showed potential and high achievement were given the opportunity to shorten their primary school education from 6 to only 5 years.

To accomplish systematic planning and implementation of programs for gifted students, it has been recommended that curriculum for the gifted should focus on enrichment in languages, mathematics, sciences and social sciences. It also highlighted the need for a balance between spiritual knowledge and the acquired knowledge. Different types of curriculum are practiced simultaneously in any school setting. Therefore, educators need to design and implement a balanced curriculum based on the various conceptions of curriculum in order to produce holistic and balanced individuals.

The hidden curriculum has been defined as school ritual and related social and symbolic relationships which contain certain implicit message of value. Studies on the hidden curriculum, especially among adolescents have thus far focused on the strategies that students use to succeed in the system and on the values gained (Ares and Gorrell, 2002; Petrie, 2004; Wojcikiewicz, 2007).

The Special Education Program (SEP) in Junior Science College is an innovation in educational design. The regular Malaysian School program is combined with a gifted program, namely the Schoolwide Enrichment Model by Renzulli and Reis (2000) which emphasizes the use of enrichment to develop students potential. In the SEP, acceleration and enrichment are widely practiced. The regular program is taught at a fast pace to make time for enrichment activities, namely, Type 1 general exploratory activities, Type 2 group training activities and the Type 3 group investigations of real problems. The students are selected based on high scores on the secondary school assessment and the JSC qualifying entrance test.

Although, the SEP has been in existence since 1991 not much has been written about its hidden curriculum. The Junior Science College setting is different in terms of student profiles, school culture and school administration when compared with local Malaysian daily or residential schools. The lack of information on the hidden curriculum can make educators and administrators unaware of its existence and hence its influences. The identification of the various facets of the program's hidden curriculum will

provide important indicators of the effectiveness of the program. This will in turn help generate important guidelines for the JSC Secondary Education Division in planning for further improvement in design and implementation of SEP.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design: A qualitative case study was undertaken to investigate the hidden curriculum of the Special Education Program implemented in the Junior Science College to facilitate the understanding of the hidden curriculum of the SEP. Hancock and Algozzine (2015) called this instrumental case study where the case was of secondary interest and played a supportive role.

This study utilized the five characteristics of a qualitative approach based on Taylor and Bogdan (1998). Observation of school activities and facilities was carried out in its natural setting and it was descriptive in nature; the emphasis was on process rather than outcomes or products the data were analysed inductively and the focus was on the meaning that the students made of their experience in JSC. Thus, the qualitative method using interviews, observations and document review has helped uncover and understand what gives rise to the hidden curriculum and the learning from the hidden curriculum in the context of the SEP.

Respondents

Case selection: The current qualitative study involved two levels of sampling. The first level involved selecting the case (the school) while the second level involved the selection of respondents to be interviewed. In this case study, the case was the Special Education Program at JSC and the respondents were the former students and teachers teaching in this school at the time of data generation. The three focus groups interviewed were coded as fgi 1-3 which comprised of a total number of 16 students. These students were coded as S1-S16. Also a total number of 6 teachers who were subject specialist in four academic departments the language, science, mathematics and social science department were interviewed for this study. They were coded as T1-T6.

Data analysis: The data analysis for this study is the process of systematically arranging the interview transcripts, field notes and other materials accumulated to increase the researcher's understanding of the data and to present the findings to others. The interview transcripts,

observation notes and field notes were integrated and content analysis was done to choose only the data that relate to the research questions. The researcher used two strategies to extract the meaning from the data: direct interpretation of individual instances and grouping of instances until a theme emerges. Thus, the researcher initially grouped quotations from each focus group's transcription into three topics, the learning and instruction, the daily school routine and the Type 3 experience (which the students call the mini thesis). These groupings were based on topics that the students discussed the most during the focus group interviews and were specific to the SEP rather than the regular JSC program.

As the narratives focused on the everyday experiences of the students, the researcher focused on examining the core narratives which reflected different students and teachers collective beliefs, expectations, practices and experiences based on Petrie (2004). Grouping these quotations facilitated the triangulation of the data across the three focus groups interviews, teacher interviews, observations and document reviews. It also assisted in the writing process, as the relevant issues were grouped together.

Data were analysed to seek issue-relevant meanings. The meanings were coded and grouped to form categories that relate to the research questions. Thus, compare and contrast approach was used based on the idea that themes reflect similar and dissimilar texts (Ragin, 2014) refer to this as the constant comparison method.

RESULTS

Considering the hidden curriculum as the result of the practices, procedures, rules, relationships, structures and physical characteristics of the special education program in JSC, the following themes emerged.

The routinized and ritualized daily activities: The typical school year at JSC consists of two semesters with an activity week in mid semester including non-academic activities. In line with the ISO certification, the school activities are planned for the entire year, resulting in a structured and planned routine. The daily schedule in JSC is tight. On a school day, school activities start at 7:15 in the morning every day and end at 5:00 pm on Mondays through Thursdays and at 1:25 pm on Fridays. On certain days, classes are held until four in the afternoon while on other days, the co-curricular activities such as talent clubs, the uniformed units or the sports clubs are

scheduled. They break for tea and prayers at 4:30 pm followed by recreation time from 5-6 pm, taking part in sports activities, cleaning the hostel or watching TV to take their mind off their books (fig 3). After the evening prayers, the night preparatory classes are held until 10:00 pm. Another important task is to ensure that the students have enough rest, especially during their early days in JSC, mainly in the fourth form (first year of high school). After supper, the lights are switched off at 11:00 pm. However, in form five which is the second year of high school they stay up later due to the heavier work load and structured time (fig 1 and 3). Even the weekends are fully scheduled for club meetings, extra classes, homeroom activities or outings to the nearest town. Although weekend schedule is less hectic, the students are busy completing assignments. The students also look forward to the weekends when they are allowed to go for outings to the town on their own.

It is a kind of time out after one week of working hard they go to the town for a change of air eat different kind of food, go to the cyber café or shop for necessities. When we went back to school we were reenergized and ready to start work again, (fig 1).

A longer time out was the activity week. The students reported that it allows them to release tensions in the middle of each semester (fig 3). For one week the students are competing in physical activities and non-academic quizzes. The student council organizes the activities with minimal help from the teachers. Each person in the student council takes turns to handle an activity (fig 1). Although, students rest their brains, they were physically tired from the physical activities. Researches looked forward to the activity week because after a long period of study she had one week out of the classroom to release her tensions" (S1). Another student noted that after the activity week everyone was feeling energized again (S2).

These findings revealed that the routines and rituals seem to ensure the smoothly running of day-to-day activities. The school planners guide students through the entire year. The students have to follow correct procedures even though academic content may be the focus of schooling. In addition, the students experienced heavy school workload time constraints, being away from their families and tight schedule which created much stress. However, the documented evidence showed that the structure of the schedule actually helped the students to manage their stress.

To the untrained eye, the rituals and routines seem mechanistic. Upon the analysis, the academic and health needs are actually well balanced. The students may not be aware that their time is neatly arranged in a

work-rest-work-rest daily routine but they know that by following the routine they can get their work done and manage their stress levels.

“There is a lot of work projects, assignments and the usual homework. We learn not to waste time and pressure is lifted by playing in the evenings”(S3, S5).

However, the well-organized style daily routines and rituals facilitate the smooth transition of activities which ensure the main goal of academic excellence to be achieved.

The collaborative effort in problem solving The SEP has a very challenging curriculum which has been considered as a crazy program (fig 2) because the schedule requires commitment from the students to complete their work. Schoolwork was aplenty and never ending. Every day there is work to be done. Individual assignments include mathematics exercises and journal writing and group projects include the earth day exhibition and the Type 3 project, for example “S4” remembered that every day is a busy day the teachers never seem to let them be free.

One week there will be activity week the next week we have exams. The following week may be the English week... Always have something to look forward to. Even if we don't get to go home, you know there's something to do, that's kind of a nice thing (S4).

Prep hours include working together finishing homework and group projects. One had only to voice a question and someone would answer. Sometimes, the questions initiated a lively discussion. “S11” found the impromptu discussions helpful,” ...like I am doing something and I will just voice up, Do you know this? Have you done this?” and when we are done other friends will ask us. It's like helping each other” (fig 1). The discussion helped them recognize their mistakes and recall what they had learnt or read. They also made sure that all their friends were prepared, checking on friends who were quiet during prep and reminding each other about due dates for their numerous assignments (fig 1; 2; 3). Thus, they end up solving problems amongst themselves instead of depending on their teachers (fig 3). “S4” stated:

We haven't learned about it but we have to present it to seniors over there, so we have to learn about it ourselves, take initiative and be proactive to learn” (S4). As a project, students were asked to present science topics from the syllabus into an exhibition, through creating games, a quiz, two experiments and preparing posters. The activities aimed to improve students' language, creative thinking and problem solving skills, besides the actual science content.

Students had to do a lot of research in order to add depth and breadth to the topic for the exhibition and they had to work together to complete the project (fig 1). “S6” disclosed that his class divided the work into smaller groups, each group working on different parts of the project (fig 1). Information gathered from conversations with the students revealed that working collaboratively resulted in getting the work done. Sharing their knowledge and working collaboratively made them understand each other well. They also had extra time to finish their work and enjoyed each other's company. They faced the challenging tasks and solved them amongst themselves. They were surprised how they could do them and at the same time, they enjoyed the challenge. The girls recalled putting up a musical effort in an Activity Week competition called Unchained Melody. “I have never acted before but I watched how the others did it and practiced in just one day! In just one day we discussed what to do and practiced, then performed that night. But it looked like we practiced for a month” (fig 1).

Indeed, the practice of involving students in group projects helped them to overcome differences and working together for a common objective, resulting in their unity and conformity. The underlying objective was to make sure everyone succeeded together. Togetherness seems to be the key word in JSC. It is not stated openly but the group work approach encouraged the students to have a “we” and “us” outlook. Thus, working together ensured success for everyone.

The well-organized living conditions: The students daily life within a closed community of adults and peers is governed by routines, rules and regulations that ensured a relatively comfortable and orderly life within the college grounds. The school community consists of the students, administrators, academic staff and support staff. Some of the staffs live in the staff quarters located within the college grounds; hence, their families are also part of the JSC community.

The students live in four hostel blocks under the care of hostel wardens who have quarters in the hostel block and in the staff quarters. The students are grouped in each block according to gender and academic year. The students are in close contact with each other every day, as they share hostel and academic facilities.

Each hostel block consists of two dormitory floors and each dormitory floor consists of two wings with an air well separating the two wings. Each floor has toilets and washroom facilities at the end of the block. Their hostel cubicles are actually partly partitioned areas of the dormitory.

The researcher had the opportunity to walk around the girls hostel on a Saturday morning. It was 8:30 in the morning and some of the girls had yet to leave for their Saturday activities. They have just had their morning exercise and breakfast. The atmosphere seemed amiable; some girls were sitting in groups of three to four on the beds and chatting. A few were cleaning their personal space. Some were doing their personal laundry in the washroom. It seemed students do their schoolwork in their classrooms or at the library the hostel is only for sleeping and doing personal chores.

Life in the hostels has its own set of rules. The rules and regulations at the hostel are more firm compared to those in the academic area. The students are penalized for coming back late to the hostel after prep hours and for being late for prayers at the college praying room. The boys recollected being forced to do push-ups and duck walk by the hostel wardens.

"All college and hostel rules have been repeatedly reminded by the wardens, discipline teacher and the prefects. Never break the law. If the manager says to be back by 10:30 it means 10:30" (S7). "I was at the gates at 10:31 and it was already locked!" (S8).

"S8" concluded that life is organized here. "It is structured what to do, you don't have to think about it, just follow".

Consequently, the organized living conditions reflect community living and authority relationships. Returning to the hostels on time was strictly enforced for girls. In the hostels, the warden's word is the rule. The rules at the hostel are more well-founded compared to those in the academic area. Students have to tolerate the hostel wardens decisions and behaviours and to behave according to the wardens wishes.

The values that drive social environment: The researcher agreed that the daily activities have obvious religious undertones, some arranged by the school and some initiated by the students themselves. "I don't think of myself as a religious person but I do agree that the culture in JSC has a tendency to make students more religious and spiritual" (S9).

The school day starts with a short morning assembly which starts at 7:15 in the morning before the start of the classes. The assembly starts with the prayer and recitation of the Asmaul Husna, the 99 names of Allah which is followed by a short talk by the teacher on duty. The boys perform their daily prayers in a congregation at the college surau while the girls congregate at their hostel praying room. These Islamic based activities help reinforce the students religious beliefs.

The students also take it upon themselves to abide and enforce these rules. The girls engage in some

activities in the hostel including the weekly usrah, enforcing the attire rules for the girls and looking after the welfare of the girls at the hostel. When asked who sets these rules, the girls said their seniors pass them onto them as unwritten rules (fig 1). "S4" believed that school environment increased his spiritual awareness. He recalled that boys follow a religious routine, for example, they read the yasiin verse every Friday night, engage in religious talks and read the mathurat and do not wear shorts even in their hostel rooms (fig 2). Consequently, they embraced strong spiritual routines in their daily life that made them better Muslims.

Another thing that they remembered was being respectful to their teachers. They hold their teachers in high esteem. Every class session ends with the students shaking and kissing the teachers hands. They try to get teachers blessing. Sometimes the teacher tries to get away when there are too many students, especially after the lecture sessions at the lecture hall.

Everyone if it's the lecture we will crowd around the teacher all of us if you don't shake their hands I don't feel nice I feel uncomfortable just leaving like that (fig 1) Students believe getting the teachers' blessings will make them feel comfortable and happy)

The tension for doing well and living up to expectations

Doing well: The SEP experience concludes with the graduation ceremony. It is a celebration of the students' excellence in the academics. The graduation ceremony awards the students with three kinds of certificates, the highest being the JSC special education certificate for students who managed a CGPA of 3.0 and above and had completed their Type 3 project.

The second certificate is the JSC Education certificate for students who completed the JSC curriculum and maintained a CGPA of at least 2.5. The third certificate is the general certificate of education for those who completed the JSC curriculum but had a CGPA of <2.5. In addition, students who maintain a CGPA of 3.5 and above each semester are awarded the certificate of honour of the principal which is an award equivalent to the Dean's list at the University level.

The graduation day program book lists the CGPAs of the students and students wear graduation robes and receive their graduation certificates in a ceremony filled with pomp and pride. The student with the highest CGPA leads the line. "Being among the top students to receive the graduation certificate is the dream of the JSC students" (fig 3).

Teachers' high expectations: The teachers have high expectations of their students. All the teachers

interviewed agreed that the JSC students were above average academically due to their high scores of secondary school exam and also JSC qualification entrance test. They also believed that the students have the capability to achieve better compared to the average students and it would be a waste if their potential were not realized. The teachers also believed that JSC school students are gifted (although they are not screened for giftedness) therefore, the students need to be challenged. Thus, their lessons are fast paced, compacted and enriched to suit the abilities of the students. Assignments and examinations are given back to back because teachers believe that the students are able to rise up to the challenges of acceleration, compaction and enrichment. They strive to make their instruction different by making it more challenging for their students.

Art teacher made his lessons more interesting and challenging by combining the elements of engineering, architecture and mathematics in his art class. In one of his class projects, students were asked to study old buildings of historical value. Instead of just drawing or painting pictures of the buildings, the students had to study the shape of the building and research its historical background, understand the factors that influence its architectural style and relate this information to the thinking of the society at that time. This adds depth to the study of art, as the students do not see art only as paintings but also as an interdisciplinary subject that they are able to appreciate better through an in-depth analysis (T2). “The purpose again is to give the knowledge for students to appreciate and to analyse a work of art...” (T2).

Teacher 1 opened the students minds to bigger challenges, namely by giving them the idea of becoming the first Malay Nobel Laureate. He wanted them to produce better quality work and to strive towards being a better person. He feels that this goal can be achieved in JSC because of the students profiles and the learning orientation there. The exposure to the Type 3 Activities gave students the opportunities to explore their interests. This orientation is subsequently reinforced with the young scientist competition at the JSC level and then the intel isef competition.

To achieve that vision, T1 gave students challenging projects that they had to apply in their everyday life. As an example, the topic on momentum had to do with the shape of cars. Therefore, he asked his students to design a car that has safety features that will suit the needs of consumers in the year 2020. Consequently, the students had to relate the design to accidents that occur today as well as to possible future situations (T1).

Thus, the teachers challenge the students into realizing their potential while at the same time, making sure the students complete the syllabus and prepare them for the examinations.

The college has many excellent students but they were also expected to develop their other potentials which cannot be done with regular students because they have to focus on their academic progress. Students who are excellent and high achievers do not have to focus on the academics because they are capable of succeeding so we planned to develop their other potentials, like their personality and social skills (T2).

This can be seen from the class presentations and group work which students do and in the process, they also improve their oratory, writing and interpersonal skills. Such was the learning environment at the JSC, challenging the students to widen their horizons and creating opportunities for the students to develop themselves.

Teachers also encouraged the students to be competitive. They looked for competitions where the students can compete from art competitions to debates, science competitions and quizzes. JSC students compete with the main objective of winning the competition, as they have the school name to uphold. JSC was seen as a premier school; thus, its students are expected to win every competition that they enter (T5). “T5” felt that the students must take every opportunity to compete which allows them to realize their full potential. Because of this practice the art teacher took his students to compete in art competitions. At one art competition, his students had to compete with students from art colleges and five of his students were among the top ten in the competition.

Students’ personal high expectations: For the students, JSC is a meeting place of some of the academically top students in the country. They are admitted into the program based on their high scores of 8As and 9As on the secondary school exam and also JSC qualification entrance Test.

“Usually the girls who enter JSC their secondary exam results are 8As or 9As only, I think. Only for the boys, there are some 7As, that’s the lowest. So, like when everybody is the chosen ones and the teachers for whatever always say that you are gifted, so everybody thinks themselves as gifted (everybody laughs)” (fig 1).

The students come to JSC to succeed, to be at the top. Some are used to being spoon fed at their former schools. Their former teachers closely guided their learning which was at a slow pace, so they did not feel rushed or challenged. Thus, when the students found out

that they would be enrolling at JSC, they felt apprehensive and anxious. Each of them prepared for their entry, as they knew they would be studying amongst the best students in the country. Some, like “S15”, took English classes so that he could better communicate with the teachers, as he knew he would be competing with the best students in the country (fig 2). This prepared them for the challenges ahead, hard work and sacrifices to ensure their success.

“S10” felt that the environment in JSC is very competitive, as everyone wanted to excel. She remembers some of her classmates cried when they got grade 79 which is a B, instead of 80 which is an A (S10). “S11” recalled that the continuous assessment helped them conscientiously keep track of their marks. “I get 90 marks for this quiz, next week I get 87 and the following week I get 80. So, it will add on and I have to maintain because the teacher will take the average” (S11).

Consequently, the students developed a strong sense of responsibility towards upholding the school’s name as the best JSC in the country. In sum, the unique pedagogical approach results in an equally unique approach to learning. The hidden curriculum seems to facilitate the achievement of goals. It shows how students strategize their learning to succeed in their studies, from working together to finish assignments to looking out for others so that no one is left behind. The policy and curriculum design seems to support the culture of good academic results and good behaviour.

The selfless approach to nurturing growth of individuals

The selfless nurturing of the teacher: “Like we see the teachers teach us wholeheartedly. I feel embarrassed if I get low marks. It is like their effort is not at par with ours” (S8).

The students found the teachers at JSC to be selfless and dedicated to teaching profession. “S12” believed that his teachers are committed to their work he perceived them as helpful and funny. “S2” and “S11” thought that their teachers cared for the slow learners in their class. “S2” recalled her teacher giving her many examples and if she still did not understand, he explained the problem to her until she did (fig 1). Although the activities slowed the pace of the lessons, they enabled the class to understand the concept better, especially when they the number of slow learners was higher (fig 1). The students soon learned to understand the methods their teachers used and came to appreciate their instructional approach. The teachers help and motivate students to work on their own (fig 1).

The students find the teachers willing to do more their job duty. Teachers work together and their mutual

dedication seemed to be making sure that their students become better individuals. In their classes, they challenged their students in their subject areas, helping them open their minds to new ideas and instilling a spirit of commitment to good values and attitudes while staying on task. “S4” appreciated his teachers, “they are not paid extra for the extra things that they do for the students but they would come at night for extra classes”.

“S11” felt that the students were actually good students but because of low inferiority complex, they could not perform well. As such, in the fourth semester, the teachers focused on preparing the students for the SPM examinations. They held revision classes known as the X classes for better students and Y classes for the weaker ones. Three of the students recalled that the teachers engage in face-to-face consultations with the Y students and the students really improve after that (S11, S13 and S2). They concluded that the teachers personalized attention in the Y classes helps boost the students morale and helps them get ready to face the SPM. Thus, teachers concerted their efforts to ensure students achieved good grades, especially for the SPM.

Students’ peer nurturing: The students also care for their peers. They noted that most students showed good behaviour, they prayed together and they did not smoke, so the others tended to do the same (S4). Peer support helped keep the students on track.

For the girls, the weekly usrah was a time for religious reflections, it was also a time to check for improper behaviour, especially on issues of socialization with the boys. The hostel student committee reprimanded the wrong doers gently and respectfully, usually the reprimand was given in general or in between jokes without mentioning any names. As a result, the girls did not feel offended, “sometimes we don’t even feel they have told us off (fig 3).

“I learnt a lot from my friends, though the lessons were not usually the stuff that you learn in the classroom, they taught me about life the purpose of living and I began to know about my creator. With these lessons, I began to see studying in a different angle. Before, I studied for the mere sake of passing exams. Now, I study because I love to study. I began to value knowledge as hidden treasure of the world. I found knowledge to be a means to get to know myself, my God and the world better. With this in mind, I begin to think rather than just absorb the things that come out of my teachers’ mouths. And that is what I think learning and studying is all about” (S10).

Thus, the positive nurturing environment of the teachers and the students builds a positive social environment that seems to spur the students to keep on

track. It facilitates the achievement of the underlying goal of success for everyone, especially during the examinations. Both teachers and students worked hard to assure everyone made it in the examinations. Being caring was instrumental in building confidence and motivating students to achieve.

The disparity between policy-making and actual support

The program policies: The special education program is an academic program that combines the curriculum of the Malaysian Ministry of Education, the JSC curriculum and the adaptation of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model to form a challenging two-year educational program for high achievers. The name special education program is a misnomer, as in the education system, it commonly refers to education for the handicapped.

However, in the JSC education system, it refers to a challenging education program for the selected students who are high achievers academically and have a high aptitude. The latter is identified through the JSC qualification entrance test. The 2003 school planner further clarified the implementation of the SEP.

Beginning 1991, JSC implemented the JSC Special Education Program. In this program, the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum is used which is enriched in an integrated and differentiated way in approach, focus and enrichment programs. Beginning from 1994 the enrichment model implemented in JSC is the model adapted from the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) introduced by Renzulli in 1985. The aim of this Special Education Program is to train students to become knowledge producers, competent problem solvers and inventors of useful products for society.

In addition, the college has a motto, "A Thinking School, A Learning Organization. The college is dedicated to playing a dynamic role in producing future professional responsible and productive leaders with a strong character, in line with the aspirations of the National Education Philosophy and the Vision 2020 through the special education program. Thus, the commitment of policy makers to a reputable educational program is indisputable. However, the program lacks certain facilities and focus.

Inadequate facilities: The special education program provides students with opportunities to develop higher cognitive competencies, especially in completing their Type 3 projects. Depending on the type of group projects chosen, students do science-based studies or survey type social studies. Some students do projects that require them to do experiments using sophisticated equipment such as the group who worked on their resume project with a professor from a local university. Another group studied patients in a psychiatric ward of a mental

hospital while another planned for a makeover of the college's meeting room. Thus, the Type3 projects gave students an opportunity to interact with academicians and professionals from the local universities, research centres, public facilities and local traders.

The purpose of the project was to produce new knowledge and inventions that would be of use to society. However, it also entailed management skills, such as designing a project and carrying it out within the limited time allocated, in addition to the daily academic and co-curricular workload. The projects required students to write proper formal letters for permission to use laboratories, understand procedures to follow and look for possible facilitators such as university professors, research assistants and even the local textile traders.

In reality, the students are hampered by the inadequate facilities in the college. There are inadequate computers and printers for their use, especially for the completion of the Type 3 project. "So like before the library opens, students have to queue" (S14). Sometimes, they have to miss meals in order to be first in line. Consequently, certain expenses they have to bear out of their own pockets. A parent whose daughter was in the program previously, listed some of the expenses students had to incur. "For example if they have to use the laboratories at UPM or USM, they have to pay for transportation, lodging, food also for printing the thesis".

Consequently, some students conducted projects for the sake of their graduation requirements while some were not interested but they had to do it T6. During the project the researcher observed one student who had created a contraption for harvesting fruits from high branches, however it lacked creativity. Although, students who won at the school level, put much more thought and attempt for planning and completing the project.

Examination oriented: The other focus of SEP was on grades. Therefore, teachers compact the curriculum in order to have time for exam preparation.

"The teachers finished the syllabus by end of semester three. It's like the last semester was revision only. One semester was a long time for exam preparation. So when it came to SPM we entered the hall feeling unthreatened" (S11).

"Because we practiced for one semester, we had enough of seeing SPM exam questions...it doesn't seem like SPM. It was like the trial (examination) was a big event, it was worse than the SPM" (S16.) The students were well prepared for the examinations but it seemed that too much emphasis on examination distracted the objective of improving the critical thinking and the generation of creative ideas. Students felt that the

emphasis was on knowledge to pass examinations and have professional careers, as “S4” indicated: “I think everything is about the knowledge. We study to get knowledge, teachers stress on knowledge”.

Some disparities were noted between the policies and the actual implementation of the program. The inadequate facilities and the focus on SPM seemed to detract the administrators, teachers and students from the actual policies of the SEP.

The unintentional creation of multiples spaces: A close analysis of the effect of the hidden curriculum revealed another interesting positive aspect of the SEP system which is the significant number of “spaces” which can be easily missed and thus not appreciated. The spaces identified here are not physical spaces but constructs of the students experiences in the social environment of JSC. These learning spaces have norms of emotional safety, sense of purpose and mutual respect that promotes learning (Kolb and Kolb, 2005).

A Hospitable Space for Learning: The positive expectations of the teachers and the students positive expectations of themselves create a hospitable space for learning. Although the tight schedule, numerous activities, projects and assignments put a heavy weight on the shoulders of the students, it is somehow balanced by the positive role models and nurturing of the teachers and their peers.

The students constantly face challenges and receive daily support. Their class assignments require thinking and problem solving in a collaborative manner. For example, the answers to designing a bridge from straws were not found in the textbooks but in the application of knowledge that the teachers taught them.

The students were able to gather information and find answers because of the hospitable space that encouraged them to discuss, refer to the internet or the library books and eventually derive answers and solutions to the problems.

Space for Development of Expertise: Learning is not only about gathering factual knowledge but also about organizing the information into a framework and the ability to retrieve knowledge and apply it to different contexts (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). The compulsory Type3 Project gave students opportunity to develop expertise in doing research and communication.

The Type 3 project is also a career clue for the students. The exposure gave them the opportunity to experience possible career choices. “S11” and her group

decided on a project to redecorate the college meeting room. All group members were interested in interior decorating; they had fun planning how to improve the room’s decoration which they described as “bleak and unattractive”.

Space for Students to Take Charge of Their Own Learning: Learning is greatly enhanced when students take control of and responsibility for their learning (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). The teachers trust and confidence in the students abilities further encouraged the students to take charge of their learning. “S4” recalled one of his teachers who gave him space to develop his abilities.

“There was one teacher who gave me a lot of space to do my thing and was satisfied just to guide me from the side-line. She had faith in me when I had none in myself. Looking back at it, the teachers went all out to stay out of the way while at the same time, giving us just enough to get by. When I was preparing for the JSC National level Young Scientist competition, the science teachers provided a laboratory for me that was accessible until midnight” (S9)

In addition, the teachers challenging instructional approach necessitated group discussions to find solutions for their group projects or even the daily mathematics homework. An example of taking charge of their-own learning was the earth day project. They were given two weeks to complete the earth day project and, as “S11” noted, if one of the students did not procrastinate work would be done.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify the hidden curriculum of the Special Education Program (SEP) at JSC. The findings provided interesting insights on what constitutes the hidden curriculum of the SEP and how the context contributes to student learning. The hidden curriculum reflects the practices, procedures, rules, relationships, structures and physical characteristic of the Special Education Program in JSC which is not part of the formal curriculum content but contributes to learning. The hidden curriculum was classified into following categories.

The routinized and ritualized daily activities: The routinized and ritualized daily activities reflect the individual and collective attempts to promote conformity to national ideals, as established by Cornbleth (1990). The day-to-day activities represent the reality of everyday life where time is compartmentalized for the completion of

certain activities. The routines and rituals seemed to ensure the smooth running of daily activities, in line with the finding by Meighan and Harber (2007). Thus, the students acquired predefined values and norms such as subordinate roles in authority relationships, while collectively these effects serve a social function to continue existing social structures.

The collaborative efforts in problem solving: Working collaboratively is a coping strategy that students use to deal with the workload and time constraints. This strategy helps students achieve their academic obligations. It shows how students actually focus on what they really need to do to survive and succeed. This is consistent with the functionalist perspective of Dreeben (1968) who looked at schools as the medium through which students learn the social norms, values and skills of the existing society.

The well-organized living conditions: The well-ordered living conditions portray the social norms of the society. The students' daily life within a closed community of adults and peers is governed by routines, rules and regulations that ensure a relatively comfortable and orderly life within the college grounds. Again, the subordinate roles in power relationship are reinforced. This is similar to (Coleman, 2001) who found students obeying rules and sacrificing personal comfort as part of the norms of adulthood.

The values driven social environment: The school environment is value driven, from an Islamic dress code to participation in religious activities such as the prayer congregation and the *usrah*. Islamic guidelines seemed to be the framework for everyday activities built into the system in an unwritten way. The students accepted the unwritten rules and being an almost all Muslim community, the obligation was unquestioned. This is consistent with Dreeben (1968); Raudenbush and Willms (2014) who established that the school environment is a medium through which students learn the social norms and values of the society.

The tension between doing well and living up to the expectations: The hidden curriculum seems to facilitate the achievement of goals, specifically, students' personal goals to perform well academically and teachers' goals to realize the potential of the students. It shows how students strategize their learning to succeed in their studies, from working together to finish assignments to looking out for others so that no one is left behind. The

policy and curriculum design seem to support the culture of good academic results and good behaviour. Although JSC emphasizes the pursuit of academic excellence, students are expected to be actively engaged in the out of class activities. They must balance their commitment to the various college activities and at the same time, study hard to maintain a high grade point average. The numerous activities held throughout the year made the journey tedious and difficult. The result is in line with studies which found that students sometimes struggle with the high expectations they believed such programs placed on them (Kao, 2011; Cohen and Hertzog, 2007; Moon *et al.*, 2002).

In addition, the teachers also believed that the students are gifted and must be challenged. Thus, their lessons are fast paced, compacted and enriched to suit the abilities of the students. These social responsibilities reflect the nature of adult society where individuals balance between personal responsibilities and social expectations. This check and balance process shows how the schooling process reinforces and/or resists the dominant ideologies and values of society which reflect a high regard for achievement and respect for teachers. Thus, teachers and students engage in certain behaviours because they do not want to incur negative consequences (Varnell, 1998).

The selfless approach to nurturing growth of individuals:

The students expressed that the teachers are selfless in ensuring the students' success. They were willing to go the extra mile to assure their students' success. As posited by (McIntire, 1998), the positive nurturing environment of the teachers and the students builds a positive social environment that seems to motivate the students to keep on track. It facilitates the achievement of the underlying goal of success for everyone especially during the examinations.

The disparity between policy-making and actual support:

The inadequate facilities and the focus on SPM seemed to detract the administrators, teachers and students from the actual policies of the SEP. While the policy encourages knowledge seekers, competent problem solvers and inventors, the facilities are inadequate and learning and instruction emphasize academic grades. The examination oriented instruction and learning resulted in students' focus on knowledge to pass examinations and to have professional careers. This is similar to Snyder (1970) who found that the academic process changed the focus of intellectual pursuit to competition for success and rewards.

The unintentional creation of multiples spaces: The hidden curriculum focuses on the role of the college in maintaining social order and stability. From the liberal perspective, the hidden curriculum includes the taken for granted assumptions and practices of school life created by the teachers and students and are accepted as the norms of school life (Skelton, 1997). The tight daily schedule, the shared facilities and the hand shaking after each class are among the taken for granted practices of JSC.

Thus, they tolerate the tight schedule and work collaboratively so that they could finish all the assignments on time. They wait in line for the toilets, tolerate each other's choice in TV programs and shake and kiss their teachers hands after class not because it is mandatory but rather because they have high respect for their teachers. This shows that the students are not only passive receivers of social norms and values but also active, purposeful creators of meaning (Snyder, 1970). In line with the contextual perspectives of Cornbleth (1990) Dewey (1997), this discussion is based on four contextual settings that the researcher identified in the study, namely the academic setting, the affective setting, the social setting and the physical setting.

CONCLUSION

The hidden curriculum of the SEP in the current study corresponded to the functionalist perspective of hidden curriculum which considered schools as a medium through which students learn the social norms, values and skills that they need in order to function and contribute to the society. This was evidenced from the social norms and beliefs tacitly transmitted through the socialization process of classroom social relationships working collaboratively on projects, accommodating others point of views and the sense of connection and commitment to others.

In addition, they developed citizenship values such as appreciation of community values, contributing to the school community, appreciation of others, participating fully in the school community life and making career decisions. The hidden curriculum complemented the formal curriculum in preparing the students for their adult roles in society. While the formal curriculum focused on the certification of academic needs, the hidden curriculum built the character of the students through understanding the procedures of community living through the values that drive the social interaction.

Finally, the hidden curriculum fulfilled the ultimate aim of JSC for holistic education, balancing the need for

academic achievement and living skills. It realized the objectives set in the National Education Philosophy on the purpose of education to create the balanced individuals.

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