

“SAYING THE QUIET PART OUT LOUD”: STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPLICIT CURRICULUM IN THE U.S.

Dee A. Sherwood, Kemmel Palmer, Karen M. VanDeusen,
Marian Tripplett, & Anna Yelick
School of Social Work, Western Michigan University (USA)

Abstract

Teaching and learning across classroom, community, and online contexts are shaped by broader social, political, and organizational environments. In the United States, social work programs are required to demonstrate student competency in diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), and anti-oppressive practice, even as DEI initiatives are increasingly dismantled through federal and executive actions that constrain institutional commitments to equity. Professional programs preparing social workers, counselors, and mental health practitioners must therefore navigate a profound contradiction between accreditation expectations and a hostile policy environment. Using a critical interpretive approach, this study analyzes written responses to open-ended survey questions from Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work students (N = 167) enrolled at a predominantly White public university in the Midwest during Spring 2022, as part of a larger mixed-methods study. Qualitative analysis revealed five thematic domains: student support services; experiences with faculty and academic advising; courses and coursework; sense of community and experiences with discrimination; and internship and field placement. Student responses were highly polarized, revealing isolated examples of excellence alongside systemic deficiencies. Students identifying as racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+, international, and/or disabled described microaggressions, silencing, and limited institutional responsiveness to reported concerns. Theoretically, the findings advance implicit curriculum theory by conceptualizing organizational culture as the primary carrier of the implicit curriculum and as a site of institutional contradiction, where professed commitments to social justice coexist with practices that reproduce harm. The study demonstrates how silence, avoidance, and procedural delay operate as forms of institutional power, rendering equity efforts performative rather than transformative. By introducing “saying the quiet part out loud” as an analytic frame, the study positions student voice as critical institutional knowledge that challenges dominant narratives of compliance, satisfaction, and accreditation legitimacy. Collectively, the findings underscore that revising explicit curriculum without addressing implicit curriculum and the organizational culture risks reproducing inequities and harm.

Keywords: *Implicit curriculum, social work, student experiences, critical interpretive.*

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning within higher education occur within broader social, political, and organizational contexts that significantly shape student experiences. Social work education is governed by accreditation standards that require attention not only to the explicit curriculum—formal coursework and competencies—but also to the implicit curriculum, defined as the organizational culture, policies, relationships, and learning environments through which students experience their education (CSWE, 2015; 2022).

The authors situate the study within a U.S. context marked by increasing politicization of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), including governmental overreach, threats to funding, and institutional hesitancy to address systemic inequities. These pressures have created a chilling effect on DEI discourse within higher education. Against this backdrop, the study analyzes student perceptions from Spring 2022, a period when discussions of DEI were more openly encouraged, rendering the findings particularly salient.

2. Conceptual framework: Implicit and explicit curriculum

The explicit curriculum refers to planned educational content, including course objectives, competencies, and instructional design (CSWE, 2015). In contrast, the implicit curriculum encompasses the learning environment itself, faculty behaviors, advising relationships, institutional responsiveness, access to resources, and cultural norms that communicate values and priorities to students (Grady et al., 2011, 2018, 2020).

The implicit curriculum is often described as “hidden,” yet it powerfully shapes students’ professional socialization. Domains commonly assessed include student support services, faculty advising, sense of community, commitment to diversity, instructional formats, and internship experiences. Prior research demonstrates that these dimensions are differentially experienced by students based on race, gender, ability status, sexual orientation, and program modality (Krase et al., 2022).

3. Review of literature on the implicit curriculum

The authors situate their work within a growing body of literature examining discrete elements of the implicit curriculum. Prior studies have documented strengths and deficiencies related to self-care modeling (Grise-Owens & Miller, 2021), DEI facilitation (Barker et al., 2023), faculty avoidance of difficult conversations about race and privilege (Keyes et al., 2023), and systemic racism within social work programs (Lilly et al., 2023).

Students in previous studies reported that instructors often lacked the skills or willingness to engage discussions of power, oppression, and white privilege. One student quoted by Keyes et al. (2023) observed: “We never discussed white privilege... She didn’t want people crying and getting upset because she didn’t know how to handle it” (p. 234).

Research has also documented how marginalized students—particularly Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, disabled, and international students—experience microaggressions, silencing, and institutional inaction when harm is reported. These dynamics communicate implicit messages about whose safety and belonging matter within social work education.

4. Methodology

4.1. Study design

The study represents the qualitative component of a larger mixed-methods investigation using standardized measures: the Implicit Curriculum Survey, Microaggressions Survey, Organizational Climate Survey, and COVID-Impacted Learning Survey. The qualitative data analyzed here consisted of open-ended written responses embedded throughout the survey.

4.2. Participants

A total of 167 students participated (approximately 18% of enrolled students). The sample was predominantly female (81.5%) and White (66.5%), with representation from Black (13.2%), Hispanic (7.2%), Asian (2.5%), and Native American (0.6%) students. MSW students comprised 68.3% of respondents, with a mean age of 27, while BSW students averaged 21 years of age.

4.3. Data analysis

The authors employed a priori coding aligned with nine implicit curriculum domains, followed by iterative open and axial coding. Attention was given to both convergence and divergence in student experiences, as well as negative cases. Member checking was conducted by presenting preliminary findings to students in an online forum.

5. Findings

Five primary themes emerged: student support services; experiences with faculty and academic advising; courses and coursework; sense of community and experiences with discrimination; and internship/field placement. Across these themes, student responses were highly polarized, revealing both individual excellence and systemic failure.

When institutions fail to address systemic inequities, students learn that stated values are not lived values. As one student’s willingness to “say the quiet part out loud” illustrates, student voices provide critical insight into institutional realities that accreditation metrics alone cannot capture.

5.1. Student support services

Students described isolated pockets of exceptional support alongside significant structural deficiencies. A staff member at a secondary campus—referred to as Ms. Joy Smith (pseudonym) was mentioned positively in eleven responses. One student stated: “Ms. Joy Smith is the sole reason many students have not withdrawn from the university’s School of Social Work.”

Similarly, the Writing Center received strong praise. However, financial support emerged as a major concern. Students reported unmet financial need, opaque scholarship processes, and limited eligibility options. One student wrote: “Unfortunately, I feel completely unsupported financially as I journey through my master’s.”

Career guidance was perceived as insufficient, with students learning about professional pathways too late to meaningfully inform concentration decisions. COVID-19 further disrupted access to services, particularly for students at off-campus locations.

5.2. Experiences with faculty and academic advising

While some faculty were praised for their pedagogical skill and care, students reported dismissive behaviors, bias, and unresponsiveness among others. One student described observing an instructor “rolling her eyes and sighing when a student is talking,” adding that reports to the university resulted in no apparent action.

Eighteen students identified serious deficiencies in faculty capacity to facilitate DEI discussions. Examples included homophobic statements, weight bias, and avoidance of explicitly naming racism and white supremacy. One student stated: “This program will not NAME racism and white supremacy... I have never been in any classroom space that has grappled with social work’s own racist history.”

Academic advising emerged as one of the most problematic areas, with 57% of respondents reporting significant issues. Students described not knowing who their advisor was, frequent advisor turnover, and inaccurate guidance resulting in delayed graduation. The reliance on a single exceptional staff member highlighted systemic failure rather than institutional strength.

5.3. Courses and coursework

Students reported uneven instructional quality and concerns about preparation for practice and licensure. Some praised applied, research-based teaching, while others described coursework as “busy work” or insufficiently rigorous. Online instruction was frequently criticized: “Discussion posts are not learning, reflection papers are not learning.”

Students also identified white-centered curricula, lack of intersectionality, and failure to address social work’s racist history. Several expressed concern about low academic expectations and the implications for client welfare.

5.4. Sense of community and experiences with discrimination

Students reported profound isolation, exacerbated by COVID-19 and online learning. Community was often attributed to peer relationships rather than institutional efforts. Many described the program as lacking diversity among both students and faculty. One student wrote: “This is a heavily white, cisgender, straight, non-disabled program.”

Reports of microaggressions spanned race, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, and body size. Students noted being “outed” during accommodation discussions, experiencing racialized language, and witnessing bias toward others. Several acknowledged that their privileged identities shielded them from direct harm, while still observing discrimination.

5.5. Internship and field placement

Internship experiences varied widely. Some students reported strong supervision, while others described lack of oversight, unqualified supervisors, ethical violations, and exploitation as unpaid labor. One student stated: “There have been huge ethics violations in many placements... It truly appears like there was no process for training supervisors.”

Concerns raised to faculty liaisons were often met with inaction, reinforcing perceptions of institutional neglect.

6. Discussion and implications

The findings depict a social work program characterized by institutional contradiction, in which individual excellence exists alongside strained, under-resourced, and unaccountable systems. While pandemic-related staffing losses, budget constraints, and faculty attrition provide important context, the findings demonstrate that such conditions do not fully explain the persistence of harm. Rather, the data

point to organizational culture as the primary carrier of the implicit curriculum, shaping how institutional values are enacted in everyday practices.

Consistent with prior scholarship, students' accounts reveal patterns of institutional silence, avoidance, and procedural delay that function as forms of power, determining whose concerns are acknowledged and whose are minimized. In this context, equity initiatives risk becoming performative when they are not accompanied by structural accountability and cultural change. The findings underscore that revising explicit curriculum or competency frameworks without addressing organizational culture leaves intact the conditions through which racism, bias, and exclusion are reproduced. Practically, the study highlights the need for program-level accountability mechanisms, faculty development in critical DEI facilitation, transparent advising and field oversight structures, and sustained investment beyond reliance on individual champions.

7. Conclusion

This study affirms that the implicit curriculum—carried through organizational culture—profoundly shapes social work students' learning, sense of belonging, and professional socialization. When institutions fail to address systemic inequities embedded in everyday practices, students learn that stated commitments to equity and anti-oppressive practice are conditional rather than foundational. The analytic framing of “saying the quiet part out loud” illustrates how student narratives surface institutional realities that accreditation metrics and formal assessments often obscure.

Meaningful transformation in social work education requires moving beyond symbolic compliance toward structural accountability, cultural change, and explicit confrontation of racism, white supremacy, and other systems of oppression. Without such efforts, social work programs risk reproducing the very inequities they are charged with challenging, undermining ethical preparation for practice in increasingly complex and inequitable social contexts.

References

- Barker, S. L., Allen, D., Moreau, K., & Soverall, N. (2023). Social work student perceptions of racism, implicit bias, and other forms of discrimination: A racial justice climate survey. *Social Work and Christianity*, 50(1), 73-90. <https://doi.org/10.3403/swc.v50i.308>
- Council on Social Work Education. (2015). *Educational policy and accreditation standards*. Retrieved from <https://www.cswe.org/getattachment/Accreditation/Standards-and-Policies/2015-EPAS/2015EPASandGlossary.pdf>
- Council on Social Work Education. (2022). *2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for baccalaureate and master's social work programs*. Retrieved from [https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/bb5d8afe-7680-42dc-a332-a6e6103f4998/2022-Educational-Policy-and-Accreditation-Standards-\(EPAS\).pdf](https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/bb5d8afe-7680-42dc-a332-a6e6103f4998/2022-Educational-Policy-and-Accreditation-Standards-(EPAS).pdf)
- Grady, M. D., Glass, V. R., Lechner, E., & Naylor S. M. (2020). What do MSW students say matters in MSW programs? Results from a qualitative study of the implicit curriculum. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 56(3), 560-575. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1656585>
- Grady M. D., Powers, J., Despard, M., & Naylor, S. (2011). Measuring the implicit curriculum: Initial development and results of an MSW survey. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 47(3), 463-487. <https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2011.200900119>
- Grady, M. D., Swick, D. C., & Powers, J. D. (2018). The Implicit Curriculum Survey: An Examination of the Psychometric Properties. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 54(2), 261-269. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48542904>
- Grise-Owens, E., & Miller, J. J. (2021). The role and responsibility of social work education in promoting practitioner self-care. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 57(4), 636-648. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.1951414>
- Keyes, T. S., Hendrix, E., Tecele, A., Andino, C., Bitters, B., Carter, R., Koelling, E., Ortiz, E., Sanchez, M., Ota, I., & Gringeri, C. (2023). “We wonder if white peers even want to understand”: Social work students' experiences of the culture of human interchange. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 59(1), 229-242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.2019640>
- Krase, K., De Long Hamilton, T., Harris-Jackson, T., Gerritsen-McKane, R., Christenson, B., Sullivan, D., Danhoff, K., & Freedman, D. (2022). Exploring correlates of implicit curriculum for accreditation outcomes evaluation: results of student evaluations. *Social Work Education*, 41(6), 1069-1088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1925241>
- Lilly, J. M., Hillyer, J., Jagers, E., & Garnigan, K. (2023). A “Totally, acceptably racist environment”: Examining anti-black racism in a school of social work. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 59(2), 391-406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2022.2119357>