



FUNCTIONAL PEDAGOGY AND THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN NIGERIA'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: A DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS GROUNDED IN SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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Abstract

This study documentarily and sociologically reflected on the tension between the functionalist pedagogical ideals articulated in Nigeria's National Policy on Education and the operational realities of the hidden curriculum. The research, grounded in functional educational theory and sociological theories of the hidden curriculum, employed a qualitative documentary analysis situated at centre an interpretive sociological framework. Eleven documents were purposively selected – policy texts (post-2012), institutional reports, peer-reviewed articles and grey literature – drawn from the broader universe of documentary corpus related to the educational system in Nigeria. Three techniques were applied for data analysis: functional coding of policy documents to identify explicit pedagogical aims; critical discourse analysis of institutional and scholarly texts to reveal implicit power dynamics; and comparative interpretive synthesis to integrate findings – all guided by Durkheimian and Bourdieusian educational sociology. Findings converge on a paradox: the formal curriculum projects functionalist pedagogical ideals of social cohesion, skill relevance and equity, yet hidden curricular practices corrode these very ideals by reinforcing stratification and undermining inclusivity, compounded by underfunding and 18 million out-of-school children. Recommendations for bridging the policy–practice divide requires reforms in curriculum, teacher training, assessment systems and equitable resourcing to deliver a tally-up of functional pedagogy with national development goals.

Keywords: Functional Pedagogy, Hidden Curriculum, Educational Policy, Educational System, Credentialism

Introduction

The formal policy architecture in Nigeria, configured in the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), assigns to schools the task of

operating on a dual mandate: first, to empower learners with practical skills and moral values; and second to contribute to social cohesion, national development and citizenship formation – all through a well-



defined framework of functional pedagogy. This policy functional pedagogical configuration is therefore operationalised through curricular directions where learners acquire vocational abilities in areas like agriculture, technology and entrepreneurship to support individual development and national growth objectives, alongside moral education that promotes values of tolerance and community service. Citizenship training is central, aiming to build national unity across ethnic and religious lines through curricular practices that target shared history and democratic principles. These elements align with broader development goals, such as those in the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan, where education serves as a catalyst for reducing poverty and maximising participation in labour force (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2017). In this sense, schools are officially tasked not only with transmitting academic knowledge, but also with reinforcing shared values and preparing young citizens to perform roles of strategically significant centrality to social order (Parsons, 1959; Durkheim, 1956).

Subterranean to these declared official mandates, however, an unintended layer of schooling operates to convey hidden messages through daily routines, teacher behaviours and institutional structures about authority, ability, conformity and belonging. These hidden messages define the concept of hidden curriculum – in turn defined as the implicit norms and values embedded in power relations, disciplinary practices, resource hierarchies and everyday pedagogical choices (Danburam et al., 2025). The hidden curriculum is not inscribed in policy texts. It is enacted daily in how classrooms are organised, how teachers treat students, how assessments reward or punish and how school culture privileges certain behaviours (Okofu & Fakere, 2024). Apart from authority, ability, conformity and belonging, the hidden curriculum also

promotes credentialism and social stratification as it operates subtly against or alongside official aims. In Nigerian classrooms, for instance, rigid hierarchies between teachers and students reinforce obedience to power, while peer dynamics may entrench ethnic or class divisions unenvisioned by policy (Danburam et al., 2025). Credentialism arises when academic qualifications assume a level where they constitute an end in themselves, prioritising certificates over genuine skill acquisition, thus perpetuating a system where access to opportunities operates contingent on formal credentials rather than competence (Okofu & Fakere, 2024). Social stratification is amplified as elite private schools transmit advantages to affluent families, operating at variance with under-resourced public institutions that implicitly signal lower expectations to marginalised groups (Kainuwa & Ashiru, 2024; Aina & Aremu, 2022).

The hidden curriculum seeps insidiously beneath educational realities in Nigeria, shaping those realities across basic, secondary and tertiary layers of schooling. Conflict disrupts schooling across a good percentage of states in the north of the country, and in these regions, hidden norms may compel priority of survival skills over academic pursuits, where literacy rates are as low as 30% in some areas compared to over 80% in the south of the country (UNESCO, 2023). According to UNICEF (2024), over 18 million children remain out of school, a figure that disproportionately affects girls and rural populations, where hidden gender biases minimise female participation in certain subjects. The National Bureau of Statistics (2024) reports youth unemployment at around 6.5%, with underemployment affecting a far greater percentage. This demonstrates that the promise of functional pedagogy for employability and individual development is



being deflated under the weight of hidden curriculum. This reinforces rather than counteracts existing structures linked to social stratification. When an environment such as this is left to fester, functional pedagogy as an officially mandated educational reality may be mediated, circumvented or even reversed by covert pedagogical forces. Schools may exhibit the propensity to privilege students endowed with cultural capital aligned with dominant norms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, as cited in Bachore, 2022). The propensity may also be generated for schools to reward passivity and deference rather than questioning, and they may structure assessment in ways that privilege rote memorisation over meaningful application (Jackson, 1968, as cited in Nwokeocha, 2019). Over time, the hidden curriculum can erode or subvert the functionalist pedagogical agenda, turning schooling into a mechanism of social reproduction rather than transformation (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

The hidden curriculum therefore calls for critical reflection on policy texts, institutional reports, UNESCO/UNICEF data and peer-reviewed literature in order to expose tensions in educational realities between the functionalist pedagogical vision of education and the subterranean operations of schooling. Such reflection can illuminate how latent norms and institutional structures mediate the formal educational mandate in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The central challenge addressed in this study centred on the tension Nigeria experiences in her educational realities between her functional pedagogical visions and the apparent persistence of hidden curricular operations against those visions. Policy frameworks emphasise relevance, moral education, social mobility and national cohesion, while actual classroom realities often privilege examinations, deference to

authority and the reproduction of social hierarchies. In essence implicit norms – shaped through teacher expectations, disciplinary practices, assessment regimes and resource allocation – convey messages that frequently conflict with policy aspirations, reinforcing inequality, cultural dominance and credentialism. This tension is compounded by systemic pressures. Millions of school-age children remain out of school, while the digital learning divide deepens out of school realities. Extensive research has investigated curriculum reform, pedagogy and access. However, there has been little sociological enquiry into how Nigeria's policy-level functionalist visions are mediated, reshaped, or contradicted by hidden curricular dynamics. A sociological reflection is therefore necessary to interrogate how functionalist principles are articulated in national policy how implicit norms operate as hidden curricula within the educational context of Nigeria and how these latent elements systematically create tension with the functionalist vision embedded in the country's educational system.

Research Questions

To guide the study, the research questions below were formulated:

1. What pedagogical objectives and social functions are advanced in Nigeria's curriculum documents and National Policy on Education, and in what ways do they embody the principles of functionalist educational theory?
2. What implicit values and norms – such as those related to authority, achievement, and social mobility – can be gleaned from sociological theories as constituting the hidden curriculum in Nigerian schools?
3. How do the sociological elements of the hidden curriculum (e.g., deference to authority, credentialism, and certification bias) systematically



undermine or contradict the functionalist pedagogical visions as institutionally enshrined in Nigeria's education system?

Theoretical Framework

This study was underpinned by two theories: functionalist educational theory and critical theories of the hidden curriculum. In the context of the study, the two theories were complementary as they served as tensioned strands of sociological theory. The functionalist perspective understands education as a mechanism for transmitting shared norms and values in which individuals are prepared for occupational roles, and ensuring social integration (Durkheim, 1956). Functional pedagogy, as reflected in Nigeria's National Policy on Education, echoes this orientation as it emphasises relevance, moral formation, citizenship formation and skills for national development. Within this view, the school is a stabilising institution that contributes to social cohesion, meritocratic selection and the reproduction of social order. Critical sociological theories of the hidden curriculum, in contrast, argue that schools do not only transmit official knowledge but they also perpetuate implicit values, hierarchies and cultural codes that reinforce existing inequalities. This was theorised by Bowles and Gintis (1976) through the "correspondence principle" where schooling reflects and reproduces wider social stratifications. The ways in which hidden curricula privilege dominant cultural forms were theorised by Apple (1982), while Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital illustrates how implicit norms favour students from the middle-class backgrounds at the expense of those from less privileged backgrounds. These perspectives suggest that education can serve as a vehicle of reproduction rather than transformation, while entrenching inequality under the pretext of neutrality.

Thus, the theoretical framework positions the school as both a site of functional integration and a locus of latent social reproduction - a duality that provides the conceptual ground for critical reflection on how the educational system in Nigeria simultaneously projects a functionalist vision and yet constrains the vision through hidden curricular processes that operate against it.

Literature Review

The Concept of Functional Pedagogy

Functional pedagogy is rooted in the functionalist tradition of sociology (Lischka-Schmidt, 2023). This in turn draws on the classical work of Durkheim (1956) and Parsons (1959). This tradition frames education as a mechanism that operates for the sustenance of social order and cohesion (Lischka-Schmidt, 2023) which builds on Durkheim's account of moral education and Parsons's view of socialisation and shared norms. The school therefore operates as a microcosm of society that reproduces norms such as discipline, achievement and cooperation, while also equipping learners with practical skills needed for societal integration (Durkheim, 1956; Parsons, 1959). Society, in this tradition, utilises education as a tool for the advancement of meritocracy in which opportunities are provided for upward mobility while legitimising institutional structures. Pedagogy thus operates as a vehicle for national development, moral formation and workforce preparation. Functional pedagogy, in contemporary discourse, extends beyond traditional skills to encompass digital literacy, global citizenship and critical thinking which are essential elements for the navigation of the economic realities of today's fast-paced era (UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa, n.d.). Functional pedagogy remains a cornerstone of curriculum design and policy formulation worldwide notwithstanding the many critiques of its constraints in addressing inequality



(OECD, 2019).

The Concept of Hidden Curriculum

The hidden curriculum refers to the implicit lessons, values, and norms that are conveyed through the routines and structures of schooling beyond the formal curricular document (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2001). This was popularised by Jackson (1968) who demonstrated that students learn compliance, punctuality and competition through daily interactions in the school environment. Educational sociological theorists in subsequent periods – e.g., Bowles & Gintis (1976); Bourdieu (1986) – argued that the hidden curriculum facilitates the reproduction of existing social structures, thereby legitimising hierarchies and dominant ideologies. Apple (1982) and Giroux (1983) highlighted that implicit schooling practices naturalise cultural dominance and political authority. More recent studies interpret the hidden curriculum as shaping professional identities, adaptability and learner dispositions (Rossouw & Frick, 2023). While there may be some advantageous from hidden curriculum – e.g., promotion of patriotism and resilience – the tension it creates with stated policy visions are well documented, particularly in areas where it reinforces passivity, credentialism or inequality (Ghimire & Neupane, 2025; Lee, 2023; Kozlowski, 2022).

Empirical Evidence: Functional Pedagogy in Tension with Hidden Curriculum

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that functionalist vision of education can play out in a tense relationship with the hidden mechanisms that the realities of everyday schooling. Earlier educational sociologists reported – e.g., Anyon (1980) in the United States – that classroom practices reproduced occupational class hierarchies despite policies promoting meritocracy; and that – e.g., Bourdieu (1986)

in France – cultural capital embedded in schools systematically advantaged dominant social groups. Similarly, Bowles and Gintis (1976) traced how American schooling reproduced capitalist economic structures through hidden pedagogical practices. In professional training contexts, Porlares and Tan (2021) found that hidden curriculum factors such as hierarchical relations more strongly influenced adaptability than official training modules. Rossouw and Frick (2023) likewise showed how hidden curricula in private higher education perpetuate competitiveness and consumerist values. In Nigeria, Okeke (2024) observed that while policies emphasise national development, schools privilege examinations, authority compliance and inequality in resource access. These findings confirm the ongoing tension in which functional pedagogy as policy ideal operates in its relation to hidden curriculum as lived practice. This tension is compounded by Nigeria's educational exclusion rates and digital divide.

Research Gap and Justification

Scholarship on functional pedagogy and hidden curriculum is robust globally, yet tension in their relationship within the educational context of Nigeria is under-researched. Curriculum reforms, pedagogical reforms or access issues have been subjected to empirical research. However, few studies have analysed how Nigeria's functionalist educational visions can be blocked the hidden curricular processes. Though international studies generate transferable insights, yet these insights fall short of substituting for Nigeria-specific sociological analysis.

The urgent need therefore arises for a study grounded in a critical juxtaposition of Nigeria's functionalist pedagogical aims with the implicit dynamics of hidden curriculum. This study therefore addresses a significant research gap. It offers a sociological reflection on how policy ideals are mediated,



reshaped or contradicted within Nigeria's education system.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative documentary analysis situated at the centre of an interpretive framework. This design proved appropriate for the interrogation of the interaction between formal policy objectives (functional pedagogy) and the implicit operations of schooling (hidden curriculum) in Nigeria. It relied on contextual depth for textual sources as units of analysis rather on primary data collection.

Corpus and Selection

The corpus of documents for the study encompassed the broader universe of documentary sources on the educational system in Nigeria. The broader corpus included policy texts – e.g., National Policy on Education (2013), Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) curriculum frameworks (2014) – institutional reports and scholarly literature. Purposive sampling was used to select eleven documents most relevant for functional coding, thematic saturation, credibility and the analytical depth of the sociological reflection.

Data Analysis

The study applied three techniques to analyse documentary data with broader sociological tools to ensure depth and rigour. First, the study analysed data from policy documents through functional coding to identifying explicit pedagogical aims as markers of social functions of schooling in line with Durkheim's sociology of functions (Durkheim, 1984). Second, the study subjected institutional reports and scholarly

texts to discourse analysis to reveal hidden values, power relations and reproductive logics as inspired by Bourdieusian sociology of education (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Finally, the study used comparative interpretive synthesis to integrate findings and expose tensions in educational realities between functionalist ideals and the hidden curricular operations of schooling in Nigeria.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: What pedagogical objectives and social functions are advanced in Nigeria's curriculum documents and National Policy on Education, and in what ways do they embody the principles of functionalist educational theory?

The NPE and associated NERDC curricular frameworks, as revealed by findings, are repeatedly emphatic on the need for unity, productivity and moral development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013; NERDC, 2014). The NPE envisages education as a tool for fostering national integration and preparing youth for social responsibility. This reflects Durkheim's (1956) functionalist vision of education as a tool for sustaining society through transmission of collective values. However, while the NPE prescribes inclusive and equitable education, implementation is uneven arising from chronic underfunding and infrastructural deficits (UNESCO IICBA, 2024). Chronic variations within regional contexts, such as literacy rates below 40% in some northern states versus 80% in the south, further undermine the functionalist promise (UNICEF Nigeria, 2025). Thus, while policy documents embody functionalist theory on paper, their operationalisation demonstrates an aspirational projection rather than a transformative reality.



1. Summary of Findings and Discussion for Research Question 1

Key Findings	Integrated Author Insights	Implications
Emphasis on productivity, development in NPE and NERDC curriculum frameworks	unity, Durkheim (1956): moral as conscience	education Policy reflects functionalist vision of collective conscience
Strong rhetoric but weak policy shift	Obanya (2004): gap between intention and practice	Functionalist aims remain implementation aspirational
Ideals of inclusion realities of inequality	vs. UNESCO IICBA (2024); UNICEF Nigeria (2025)	Undermines functionalist social cohesion regional disparities and deficits

Sources: Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013); NERDC (2014); Durkheim (1956); Obanya (2004); UNESCO IICBA (2024); UNICEF Nigeria (2025).

Research Question 1: What implicit values and norms – such as those related to authority, achievement and social mobility – can be gleaned from sociological theories as constituting the hidden curriculum in Nigerian schools?

The analysis of institutional reports and secondary literature accounts reveals that a strong hidden curriculum transmits values different from policy architectural prescriptions. Central among these are authoritarianism, rote learning, examination-driven achievement and credentialism, particularly via WAEC/NECO exams (Ozor, 2021). Social mobility relies on certificate

possession rather than knowledge acquisition. This echoes Bourdieu's critique of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1990). Teachers and educational institutions, quite unconsciously, reinforce hierarchical values that privilege obedience over creativity (Duze, 2012). Inequalities arising from gender, class and region are normalised. This is evident in girls from the north of the country facing lower enrolment in school (UNICEF Nigeria, 2025). This undermines meritocratic ideals and thereby silently legitimises power and privilege through school routines and assessment structures.

2. Summary of Findings and Discussion for Research Question 2

Key Findings	Integrated Author Insights	Implications
Hidden curriculum of authority, learning, credentialism	Bourdieu (1977, 1990): rote reproduce critique of credentialism; Ozor (2021): hidden curriculum in Nigeria	schools Norms undermine equity Illich (1971):
Exams dominate schooling (WAEC, NECO, e.g., CBT shift	Duze (2012): policy effects on schooling; reinforces exam dependency	Overemphasis on certification debates)



Sources: Bourdieu (1977, 1990); Illich (1971); Ozor (2021); Duze (2012); UNICEF Nigeria (2025).

Research Question 3: How do the sociological elements of the hidden curriculum systematically undermine or contradict the functionalist pedagogical visions as institutionally enshrined in Nigeria's education system?

The findings show significant tension in Nigeria's educational realities between functional pedagogy and hidden curricular practices. Policies project inclusivity, unity and skill development. This stands at variance with actual realities where the hidden operations of schooling deliver a curriculum heavy on conformity, hierarchy

and credentialism (Ozor, 2021). Durkheim's (1956) conception of education as moral regulation delivers a tally-up with the official curriculum. However, the vision is undermined by examination-centred learning and authoritarian pedagogy. Bourdieu's (1990) theory of cultural capital can be applied to explain these outcomes more effectively: education amplifies social variations where 18.3 million outof-school children drive inequities (UNICEF Nigeria, 2025). Certification bias (e.g., WAEC/NECO determining life chances) sustains inequality despite claims of inclusivity.

3. Summary of Findings and Discussion for Research Question 3

Key Findings	Integrated Author Insights	Implications
Functionalist aims contradicted by hidden norms	Apple (2004): schools reproduce inequality despite rhetoric; Ozor (2021): examdriven hidden curriculum	Declared ideals vs. lived practices
Policy unity vs. classroom inequality	Durkheim (1956): education as moral integration; Bourdieu	Education both unites and divides stratification (1990): reproduction of inequality

Sources: Durkheim (1956); Bourdieu (1990); Apple (2004); Ozor (2021); UNICEF Nigeria (2025).

Synthesis of Findings

The analyses converge on a paradox: Nigerian education policy articulates functionalist ideals of unity, order and

productivity but the hidden curriculum entrenches structural inequalities that adulterate these very ideals



4. Integrated Synthesis of Findings for Research Question 1 – 3

Research Focus	Explicit Curriculum/Policy (Functionalist Vision)	Hidden Curriculum (Sociological Reality) Tensions	Resulting Contradictions/
Pedagogical objectives (Research question 1)	Education as tool for national values, skill development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013; Durkheim, 1956; NERDC, 2014)	Implementation moral constrained by uneven quality (UNESCO IICBA, 2024; UNICEF Nigeria, 2025)	Policy ideals remain aspirational
Values & norms (Research Question 2)	Equality, civic responsibility – Federal of Nigeria NERDC (2014)	discipline, Credentialism, rote class/gender stratification (2013), (2021; Duze, 2012; Bourdieu, 1990)	Inequality learning, reproduced despite rhetoric (Ozor,
Functionalist hidden contradictions (Research Question 3)	vs. Vision of equitable – (1956); Apple (2004)	cohesive, society Durkheim (1956); Bourdieu, 1990; Ozor, 2021)	Hierarchies reinforced in practice (Apple, 2004; reproduction, not levelling

Sources: Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013); NERDC (2014); Durkheim (1956); UNESCO IICBA (2024); UNICEF Nigeria (2025); Ozor (2021); Duze (2012); Bourdieu (1990); Apple (2004).

Conclusion

The core revelation from the study is that while functionalist pedagogical ideals are configured in policy architecture in Nigeria, the realities of schooling are shaped by hidden curricular forces that prioritise rote learning, authoritarianism and credentialism. There is a persistent gap between policy aspirations and implementation realities that are driven by systemic inequities, examination-operated schooling and uneven resourcing across regions. The pedagogical implementation realities are also shaped by the fact that 18 million children are out of school, as well as by education funding at 7% of the national budget, far below the 15–20%

benchmark of UNESCO. Consequently, education in Nigeria would continue to reproduce social inequalities rather than transform them, which could constrain its potential to deliver on the functional pedagogical goals of national policy.

Recommendations

To address these contradictions, the following recommendations are proposed: The Federal Ministry of Education should tweak curriculum reforms to allow for compatibility with mechanisms that explicitly counter the hidden curriculum of examcentricity and credentialism.



1. Teacher training programmes should strengthen teacher preparation and continuous professional development to promote equity, inclusivity and participatory pedagogy.
2. Examination bodies should reform assessment systems by reducing reliance on highstakes testing and adopting diversified methods that reward critical thinking.
3. Federal and State Governments should prioritise equitable resource distribution to bridge rural–urban and regional divides in educational access and quality within the framework of UNESCO's funding benchmark.
4. School Administrators should encourage student participation in school decisionmaking as a counteraction against passivity and foster democratic practice.
5. Educational researchers and research institutes should accelerate research operations that target the hidden curriculum and feed findings into regular reviews of national education policy.

These recommendations, if implemented, could bridge the policy-practice divide, fostering a more equitable system that realises functionalist aspirations while mitigating reproductive forces.

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