
HIDDEN CURRICULUM AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) IN DIVERSE CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between hidden curriculum and socio-emotional learning in secondary schools in Imo state. A correlational research design was used and 486 school staff were sampled through stratified random sampling across urban and rural public and private secondary schools in Imo state. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire titled Hidden Curriculum and Socio-Emotional Learning Questionnaire, (HCASELQ) and the data retrieved were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient at a 0.05 significance level. The findings revealed a very strong and significant relationship between hidden curriculum and socio-emotional learning. The study concluded that hidden curriculum is critical in strengthening socio-emotional learning in secondary schools in Imo state. It recommends strengthening communication systems, institutionalizing negotiation training, promoting participatory decision-making.

Keywords: Hidden Curriculum, Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL), Public Schools, Private Schools

Introduction

Education is rarely confined to the explicit content found in syllabi, textbooks and lesson plans. Alongside the formal curriculum, schools transmit a set of unwritten expectations, norms, and values that shape how students understand themselves, others and their place in the social order. This unwritten dimension, often called the hidden curriculum, operates continuously in classrooms through teacher behavior, peer interactions, classroom routines, disciplinary practices and the subtle signals embedded in school culture. In diverse classrooms where students differ in ethnicity,

language, socioeconomic background, ability, religion and family structure the hidden curriculum becomes particularly consequential. It can either reinforce inclusion and belonging or reproduce exclusion and marginalization, depending on how it is enacted and interpreted. According to Obizue & Obizue (2025), the growing demographic complexity of classrooms across many countries has brought renewed attention to how students develop the capacities needed to navigate this complexity. Academic knowledge alone is insufficient for students to thrive in environments where they must interpret differing perspectives, manage interpersonal friction, collaborate across difference and regulate their own emotional responses. Ayodele (2018) posited that social-emotional learning has emerged as a deliberate effort to cultivate these capacities. SEL focuses on five core domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. When integrated thoughtfully, SEL aims to equip learners with the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills that support both academic engagement and healthy social functioning.

The intersection of the hidden curriculum and SEL in diverse classrooms presents both a challenge and an opportunity. On one hand, the hidden curriculum is largely implicit and often unintended. Teachers may not recognize the messages they convey through whom they call on, how they discipline, what examples they use, or which cultural references they treat as default. In diverse settings, these implicit signals can inadvertently privilege certain cultural norms while marginalizing others. A classroom that rewards rapid, verbal participation may favor students from communication styles that emphasize directness and assertiveness, while disadvantaging students from backgrounds where restraint and collective deliberation are valued. Similarly, disciplinary routines that interpret emotional expression through a single cultural lens can misread distress, defiance, or disengagement, leading to punitive rather than supportive responses.

On the other hand, the hidden curriculum is not fixed. Because it is enacted through daily interactions and organizational practices, it is amenable to intentional influence. This is where SEL becomes relevant. SEL provides a framework for making the implicit explicit for naming emotional processes, modeling respectful communication, and establishing classroom norms that recognize and value multiple ways of being and relating. When SEL is integrated with an awareness of the hidden curriculum, teachers can examine whose norms are embedded in routines, whose experiences are reflected in instructional materials and how power operates in classroom discourse (Makere & Jonas, 2023). This examination creates space to redesign interactions so that they affirm diverse identities and build the social-emotional competencies needed for equitable participation. Understanding this intersection requires attention to three interrelated processes. First, there is the process of transmission. The hidden curriculum transmits messages about belonging, status, and competence through everyday classroom life. In diverse classrooms, these messages are received differently depending on students' prior experiences, cultural scripts and

positions within broader social hierarchies. A student whose home language differs from the language of instruction may interpret silence as respect, while a teacher interprets it as disengagement. Without awareness, such mismatches can reinforce a hidden message that some ways of knowing and communicating are more legitimate than others.

Second, there is the process of mediation. Teachers, peers and institutional structures mediate how the hidden curriculum is experienced. A teacher who practices emotional coaching, validates multiple cultural expressions of respect, and uses restorative approaches to conflict can alter the impact of potentially exclusionary norms. Peers also mediate through the social norms they establish and enforce among themselves. Institutional structures, such as grouping practices, assessment policies, and discipline codes, further shape what students come to understand as normal and valued in the classroom. Third, there is the process of internalization and response. Students do not passively absorb the hidden curriculum. They interpret, resist, adapt to, or rework the messages they receive. Their responses are shaped by their developing social-emotional competencies. Students with stronger self-awareness and relationship skills are better positioned to navigate cultural mismatch, advocate for themselves, and build bridges across difference. Conversely, students who lack support for these competencies may withdraw, disengage, or internalize negative self-perceptions that affect their academic trajectory.

Ajaegbu (2016) observed that the significance of studying the hidden curriculum in relation to SEL in diverse classrooms lies in its implications for educational equity and Sulieman (2025) validated that formal curriculum reforms and policy mandates often focus on content coverage, standards alignment, and measurable outcomes. While important, these reforms can overlook the daily relational and cultural dynamics that determine whether students actually access the learning opportunities provided. If the hidden curriculum communicates that certain students do not belong, or that their ways of knowing are deficient, then even a well-designed formal curriculum will have limited impact. Conversely, when the hidden curriculum is aligned with inclusive SEL practices, classrooms become sites where diversity is treated as a resource rather than a problem to be managed (Jekwu, 2018). This relationship also matters for teacher practice and preparation. Many teachers enter diverse classrooms without explicit training on how to recognize and respond to the hidden curriculum. Teacher education programs frequently separate pedagogical content knowledge from classroom management and cultural competence, creating a gap between what teachers know about subject matter and how they enact that knowledge in socially complex environments. Integrating SEL and critical reflection on the hidden curriculum into teacher preparation and professional development can help teachers develop the observational and reflexive skills needed to notice subtle dynamics, interpret them accurately, and adjust their practice accordingly (Sunderia & Ayush 2014).

From a research perspective, the intersection raises important questions about measurement and methodology. The hidden curriculum is, by definition, not documented in official texts. It must be inferred from observation, discourse analysis, and the lived experiences of students and teachers. SEL outcomes are similarly complex, involving competencies that are context-dependent and difficult to reduce to standardized scores. Studying this intersection therefore requires mixed-methods approaches that combine classroom observation, interviews, narrative inquiry, and participatory methods with attention to how context shapes meaning. It also requires comparative work across diverse settings to avoid overgeneralizing findings from one cultural or institutional context to another. Obizue & Obizue (2025) asserted that diverse classrooms are not a temporary condition but a defining feature of education in an interconnected world. Students who learn to navigate difference with empathy, self-regulation, and collaborative skill are better prepared for civic participation, the workplace, and personal well-being. Schools that attend to both the hidden curriculum and SEL create conditions where such learning is more likely to occur. Schools that ignore these dimensions risk reproducing patterns of inequity under the guise of neutrality, as the absence of intentional design does not produce neutrality but defaults to dominant norms.

This introduction sets the stage for a deeper examination of how the hidden curriculum operates in diverse classrooms and how SEL can be leveraged to make that operation more equitable. The study explores the theoretical foundations of the hidden curriculum, the conceptual framework of SEL, empirical evidence on their interaction and practical strategies for educators and policymakers. The goal is not to treat the hidden curriculum as something to be eliminated since all social settings carry implicit norms but to make it visible, subject to ethical scrutiny and open to redesign in ways that support the social-emotional development and academic success of all learners.

Ultimately, the question is not whether a hidden curriculum exists, but what kind of hidden curriculum is being enacted, for whom and with what consequences. In diverse classrooms, that question is unavoidable. Addressing it requires moving beyond a focus on individual student deficits or teacher technique alone, toward an understanding of classrooms as cultural and relational systems (Gay, 2002). Within those systems, SEL offers tools for reshaping interactions and norms, while critical attention to the hidden curriculum provides the diagnostic lens needed to apply those tools where they matter most.

Classrooms today are increasingly characterized by diversity in language, culture, socioeconomic background, ability, religion and family structure. Emeani & Amadi (2024) advocated that this diversity brings intellectual and social richness, but it also creates complex relational and interpretive demands for both students and teachers. While formal curricula are designed to specify what students should learn, a substantial portion of what students actually experience in school is conveyed through the hidden curriculum the implicit norms, expectations, routines, disciplinary

practices, and cultural assumptions embedded in everyday classroom life. These implicit messages shape how students understand belonging, competence, authority, and fairness. In diverse classrooms, the hidden curriculum can either function as a bridge that affirms multiple identities and ways of knowing, or as an unexamined mechanism that privileges dominant cultural norms and marginalizes others. The problem is that this process largely operates outside conscious design, and its consequences are often misattributed to individual student deficits, motivation, or family background rather than to the interactional and cultural dynamics of the classroom itself.

The difficulty is compounded by the fact that many teachers enter diverse classrooms without structured preparation for recognizing and interpreting the hidden curriculum. Teacher education and professional development have historically separated pedagogical content knowledge from cultural competence and classroom management, treating the latter as secondary or intuitive. As a result, teachers may unintentionally communicate that certain behaviors, communication styles, emotional expressions and forms of participation are normative, while others are disruptive, deficient, or invisible. For example, a classroom norm that rewards rapid verbal responses may advantage students socialized in communication styles that value directness and individual assertion, while disadvantaging students whose cultural scripts emphasize collective deliberation, restraint, or nonverbal modes of participation (Ajaegbu, 2016). Similarly, disciplinary routines that interpret emotional expression through a single cultural lens can misread distress, grief, or cultural forms of respect as defiance or disengagement, leading to punitive responses that erode trust and diminish students' willingness to engage.

In the words of Obizue & Obizue (2025), it is against this backdrop that social-emotional learning has gained prominence as a framework for developing the capacities students need to navigate complex social environments. Social-emotional learning targets competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Ayodele (2018) observed that when SEL is integrated thoughtfully, it provides language and practices for naming emotions, managing conflict, recognizing diverse perspectives and establishing inclusive norms. However, the implementation of SEL often occurs alongside, rather than in dialogue with, an examination of the hidden curriculum. Programs may teach emotional vocabulary and conflict resolution strategies while leaving intact classroom routines, grouping practices, assessment policies, and interactional patterns that communicate exclusion or bias. The consequence is a fragmentation where explicit SEL lessons are undermined by implicit messages conveyed through daily practice. Students quickly learn to distinguish between what is taught in a lesson and what is actually valued in the lived experience of the classroom.

Some problems necessitated this study and there are in twofold; First, the hidden curriculum in diverse classrooms continues to operate with insufficient visibility and critical scrutiny, leading to patterns of differential treatment, misinterpretation, and exclusion that affect students' sense of

belonging and academic engagement. Second, efforts to strengthen social-emotional learning frequently lack a critical link to the hidden curriculum, resulting in interventions that are pedagogically sound in principle but limited in effect because they do not address the underlying interactional and cultural conditions in which students apply those skills. Without an integrated understanding of how the hidden curriculum mediates the development and expression of social-emotional competencies, reforms risk treating symptoms rather than conditions. Students may acquire SEL vocabulary and strategies but lack opportunities to use them authentically in classrooms where the implicit norms contradict the stated values of inclusion, respect, and equity.

This problem matters because the gap between formal educational intentions and lived classroom experience has direct implications for equity and learning. Research on student engagement consistently shows that a sense of belonging and psychological safety are prerequisites for cognitive risk-taking, persistence, and academic achievement. Emeani & Amadi (2024) averred that when the hidden curriculum communicates that a student's cultural references, language practices, or emotional expressions are out of place, the student's capacity to participate fully is constrained, regardless of the quality of the formal curriculum. Over time, repeated experiences of mismatch can lead to disengagement, internalized low expectations, and disciplinary trajectories that disproportionately affect students from marginalized backgrounds. These outcomes are not solely the result of individual teacher bias or student behavior; they emerge from the interaction between institutional routines, classroom norms, and the interpretive frameworks that students and teachers bring into the classroom.

The significance of studying the intersection of the hidden curriculum and social-emotional learning in diverse classrooms lies in its potential to inform more coherent and equitable educational practice. By making the hidden curriculum visible, educators and researchers can identify which implicit norms support or hinder inclusive participation, and how those norms interact with students' developing social-emotional competencies. Such understanding shifts the focus from remediation of individual students to redesign of classroom systems and interactions. It enables teachers to align their instructional and relational practices so that the explicit goals of SEL are reinforced rather than contradicted by the implicit messages of daily classroom life. This alignment is particularly important in diverse classrooms, where the range of cultural scripts for communication, authority, and emotion is broader, and where the cost of misinterpretation is higher. From a policy and teacher education perspective, the significance extends to how professional knowledge is constructed and transmitted. If the hidden curriculum remains tacit, it cannot be discussed, critiqued, or revised collectively. Professional learning communities, supervision, and mentoring remain limited to observable lesson delivery and classroom management techniques, without attention to the cultural and relational subtext that shapes their effectiveness (Gay, 2002). Integrating attention to the hidden curriculum with SEL provides a

framework for professional dialogue that is concrete, grounded in classroom interaction, and oriented toward equity. It allows teacher preparation programs to move beyond abstract discussions of diversity toward specific practices for noticing, interpreting, and responding to the subtle dynamics that constitute classroom culture.

Methodologically, the study of this intersection addresses a gap in educational research. The hidden curriculum is inherently difficult to document because it is not codified in texts or policies. It must be inferred through observation, discourse analysis, and attention to participants' lived experiences. Social-emotional learning outcomes are similarly complex, involving competencies that are context-dependent and expressed differently across cultural settings. A study that brings these two domains into dialogue requires mixed-methods approaches that can capture both interactional patterns and participants' meaning-making. The findings from such work can contribute to theory by clarifying how implicit norms shape the development and application of social-emotional competencies, and to practice by generating descriptive and analytical tools that educators can use in their own contexts.

This study render immediate and personal significance to the students. Classrooms are among the first public spaces in which young people encounter and negotiate difference at scale. The way diversity is managed in these spaces teaches students not only about academic content but about how society handles difference, authority and belonging (Jekwu, 2018) When the hidden curriculum and SEL are misaligned, students learn that formal commitments to inclusion are performative, and that success requires assimilation to a narrow set of norms. When they are aligned, students experience classrooms as places where multiple ways of being are intelligible and valued, and where social-emotional competencies are relevant to real relationships and collective problem-solving. This experience has implications beyond schooling, shaping how students approach civic participation, workplace collaboration, and interpersonal relationships in a pluralistic society.

Makera & Jonas (2023) considered relevance to contemporary educational challenges and further emphasized that schools are being asked to address widening social divides, rising rates of student stress and anxiety and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity with resources that have not kept pace with these demands. In this context, interventions that rely solely on adding new programs or content are unlikely to be sustainable. A more promising approach is to examine and redesign the conditions that shape how existing practices are experienced. By focusing on the interaction between the hidden curriculum and social-emotional learning, this study addresses a lever for change that is present in every classroom, regardless of resource level. It offers a pathway for improving equity and engagement not by replacing what teachers do, but by making visible the implicit dimensions of their work and providing frameworks for intentional redesign. It is important to note that the hidden curriculum in diverse classrooms continues to shape student

experience in ways that are often inequitable and unexamined, while social-emotional learning efforts remain insufficiently connected to these implicit dynamics. The study of this correlation intersection provides a basis for making classrooms more coherent, inclusive and supportive of both academic and social-emotional development. Addressing it requires moving beyond a focus on individual deficits or isolated interventions toward an understanding of classrooms as cultural and relational systems in which explicit and implicit learning are inseparable (Suleiman, 2025).

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by investigating the effect of hidden curriculum on the socio-emotional learning in diverse classrooms. Specifically, the study sought to examine:

1. the relationship between hidden curriculum and social awareness and relationship skill of secondary school students in Imo State
2. the effect of hidden curriculum on the sense of belonging and school engagement of secondary school students in Imo State

To achieve the stated objectives of the study, the following research questions were posed to guide the study:

1. What is the relationship between hidden curriculum and social awareness and relationship skill of secondary school students in Imo State?
2. To what extent does hidden curriculum affect the sense of belonging and school engagement of secondary school students in Imo State?

The following null hypotheses were formulated to guide this study and they are tested at 0.05 level of significance.

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between hidden curriculum and the social awareness and relationship skill of secondary school students in Imo State

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between hidden curriculum and the sense of belonging and school engagement of secondary school students in Imo State

Conceptual Clarification

Hidden Curriculum in Diverse Classrooms

The hidden curriculum refers to the implicit lessons, values, norms and social expectations that students absorb in educational institutions outside of the formal, stated syllabus. It is not written in course outlines or timetables, yet it operates continuously through the structure of the school day, the organization of classrooms, the way authority is exercised, the interactions between staff and students, and the unspoken rules that govern behavior and success within the institution.

Where the formal curriculum declares what is to be taught mathematics, history, management theory, the hidden curriculum communicates how one is expected to act, what forms of knowledge and conduct are valued, and which identities and dispositions are rewarded or marginalized in the process of becoming educated (Ajaegbu, 2016).

This informal transmission occurs because schools and universities are not merely sites of instruction but also social institutions that reproduce and negotiate broader cultural and organizational patterns. The arrangement of seating, the emphasis on punctuality and obedience, the differential attention given to certain students, the privileging of competitive individual achievement over collaborative problem-solving, and the tone of communication between lecturers and students all convey messages about power, hierarchy, discipline, and legitimacy. Students learn to interpret these cues and adjust their behavior accordingly, often without conscious recognition that they are doing so. In this way, the hidden curriculum shapes dispositions toward authority, attitudes toward peers, and internalized standards of what counts as a “good student” or a “serious scholar.” It can reinforce conformity, deference, and instrumental approaches to learning, but it can also foster resilience, ethical reasoning, and a sense of collective responsibility depending on the ethos of the institution.

According to Obizue & Obizue (2025), in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, the hidden curriculum manifests in practices such as the weight placed on attendance and formal deference to lecturers, the informal networks that determine access to project supervision and opportunities, and the implicit expectations around dress, language and comportment in academic settings. These elements influence students’ professional socialization as much as the formal courses they take, and they affect how graduates navigate workplaces and public life after graduation. Because the hidden curriculum is tacit, it tends to escape scrutiny and evaluation, yet it has substantive consequences for equity, inclusion, and the development of critical citizenship. When its messages align with the stated mission of the institution critical thinking, integrity, service it reinforces educational goals. When it contradicts them, it undermines them, producing graduates who may be technically competent but alienated from the values the university claims to uphold. Jekwu (2018) stated that recognizing and deliberately examining the hidden curriculum therefore becomes a necessary part of institutional self-assessment, allowing leaders and educators to align the lived experience of students with the explicit aims of higher education.

Socio-Emotional learning in Diverse Classrooms

Socio-emotional learning is the process through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible decisions. It operates on the premise that cognitive development and

academic achievement cannot be separated from the social and emotional capacities that shape how students engage with themselves, their peers, and the learning environment. Rather than treating emotions and relationships as peripheral to education, socio-emotional learning positions them as integral to the conditions under which learning becomes possible and sustained.

Suleiman (2025) posited that socio-emotional learning concerns the internal regulation of thought and feeling and the external negotiation of social life within structured settings such as classrooms and institutions. Students develop an awareness of their own emotional states and the triggers that influence their motivation, attention, and behavior, and they learn strategies for managing stress, frustration, and conflict in ways that preserve their capacity to participate productively. This self-management is coupled with social awareness the ability to recognize and respond appropriately to the perspectives and emotions of others which underpins collaboration, respect for diversity, and the building of trust in academic communities. As these capacities mature, they influence how learners interpret feedback, handle setbacks, seek help, and contribute to group tasks, all of which directly affect persistence and performance over time.

In the words of Sunderia & Jonas (2023), in higher education contexts, socio-emotional learning extends beyond adolescent socialization to encompass professional identity formation, ethical judgment, and the resilience required to navigate complex academic and workplace demands. Universities that attend to this dimension do so not by replacing disciplinary content but by shaping the relational and organizational conditions in which that content is encountered. Mentoring relationships, peer interaction, institutional climate, and the way authority is exercised all convey implicit lessons about empathy, accountability, and self-regulation. When these elements are coherent with stated educational goals, they reinforce a culture in which students feel safe to take intellectual risks, reflect critically, and assume responsibility for their learning and conduct. Conversely, when socio-emotional needs are neglected, students may experience disengagement, anxiety, and a narrowed sense of agency that limits both academic outcomes and long-term adaptability. In this sense, socio-emotional learning is less a separate subject than a set of competencies and environmental conditions that determine whether the formal curriculum can be received, processed, and applied in ways that serve both individual growth and collective well-being.

Emeani & Amadi (2024) observed that in diverse classrooms, socio-emotional learning concerns the development of capacities that allow students from varied cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds to understand and manage their emotions, build respectful relationships, and navigate differences constructively within a shared learning space. It addresses how learners become aware of their own emotional responses in the face of unfamiliar norms, how they interpret the intentions and perspectives of peers and teachers whose frames of reference may differ from their own, and how they regulate behavior to sustain collaboration despite those

differences. Because diversity introduces multiple expectations about communication, authority, conflict, and participation, socio-emotional learning provides the relational foundation that makes it possible for students to engage without retreating into misunderstanding or withdrawal. When classrooms are attentive to this dimension, students develop empathy, perspective-taking, and conflict-resolution skills that allow them to move beyond initial discomfort toward mutual recognition (Ayodele, 2018). Teachers' responsiveness to students' emotional cues, the establishment of shared norms that honor multiple modes of expression, and the modeling of respectful dialogue all shape an environment where identity is not treated as a barrier to participation. In this way, socio-emotional learning in diverse classrooms does not merely support individual well-being; it conditions the social climate that determines whether diverse learners can translate their different experiences into productive academic exchange. Without these capacities, cognitive engagement is constrained by anxiety, miscommunication, or a sense of exclusion, whereas with them, diversity becomes a resource for deeper learning and collective problem-solving.

Relationship between Hidden Curriculum and Socio-Emotional learning in Diverse Classrooms

The hidden curriculum and socio-emotional learning are intertwined because the implicit messages conveyed through institutional routines, interaction patterns, and expectations directly shape the emotional and social capacities students develop. The hidden curriculum communicates, often without explicit statement, what forms of language, behavior, and identity are valued and who is positioned as a legitimate participant in academic life. In a diverse setting, where students differ in culture, language, and prior schooling, these unspoken norms can either affirm multiple ways of being or subtly privilege a dominant cultural script. When the hidden curriculum signals inclusivity and respect for difference, it creates the relational safety that allows socio-emotional learning to flourish, enabling students to manage emotional responses to unfamiliarity, develop empathy across cultural divides, and engage confidently in collaborative learning. Conversely, when the hidden curriculum reinforces exclusion or silence around diversity, it generates anxiety, mistrust, and withdrawal, which undermine students' ability to regulate emotions and build supportive relationships. Thus, the hidden curriculum establishes the social and emotional climate within which socio-emotional learning occurs, while the development of socio-emotional capacities determines whether students can interpret, navigate, and reshape the implicit norms they encounter, making the two processes mutually constitutive in determining whether diversity translates into equitable participation or into differentiated exclusion.

Methodology

This study adopted a correlational research design to determine the statistical relationship between hidden curriculum and socio-emotional learning in secondary school students in Imo State. The study population consisted of all the staff of public and private secondary schools located in the urban and rural areas of Imo state as reported by the Ministry of education. Given the large population, a sample size of 486 was determined using Taro Yamane’s (1967) formula at a 5% margin of error. The study adopted the stratified random sampling technique to ensure appropriate enhance representation. The population was stratified into urban and rural schools, and then public and private schools, after which proportional allocation and simple random sampling were used to select participants from each stratum. Two self-developed Questionnaires were used to collect the data that was used in this study. The questionnaires comprised of two sections Section A on demographic data and Section B containing the items arranged according to the research questions and rated on a 4-point Likert scale. To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by three experts in relevant academic fields such as Curriculum studies, educational psychology and measurement and evaluation who provided corrections to improve clarity and relevance. Reliability was established using the test–retest method with 20 respondents outside the study area. After a two-week interval, scores from both administrations were correlated using Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation Coefficient, yielding reliability indices of 0.87 and 0.89, confirming high instrument reliability. 486 copies of the questionnaire were given to the respondents, but only 481 were retrieved. The data were analyzed using the Pearson’s correlation at a 0.05 level of significance via the SPSS software.

Result

Table 1: Result of Analysis on Relationship between Hidden Curriculum and Social Awareness and Relationship Skill of Secondary School Students in Imo State

Variables		Hidden Curriculum	Social Awareness and Relationship Skill
Hidden Curriculum	Pearson correlation	1	.901**
	Sig (2-tailed)	.021	
	N	486	486
Social Awareness and Relationship Skill	Pearson correlation	.901**	1

	Sig (2-tailed)	.021	
	N	486	486

Source: SPSS Output, (2025) **correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 1 confirms a Pearson correlation of 0.901 with a significance value of ($p = 0.021 < 0.05$), demonstrating a very strong and statistically significant relationship between hidden curriculum and socio-emotional learning proxied by social awareness and relationship skill of secondary schools in Imo state. This rejects the null hypothesis and affirms no significant relationship between the variables. Statistically, the almost perfect correlation means that variations in hidden curriculum accounts for 90.1 % of the variations in socio-emotional learning of the student in secondary schools in Imo state. Practically,

Table 2: Result of Analysis on the Extent of the Effect of Hidden Curriculum on the Sense of Belonging and School Engagement of Secondary School Students in Imo State

Variables		Hidden Curriculum	Sense of Belonging and School Engagement
Hidden Curriculum	Pearson correlation	1	.519**
	Sig (2-tailed)	.025	
	N	486	486
Sense of Belonging and School Engagement	Pearson correlation	.519**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.025	
	N	486	486

Source: SPSS Output, (2025) **correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 2 shows a Pearson correlation of 0.519 with a significance of ($p = 0.025 < 0.05$), confirming a moderate but significant relationship between hidden curriculum and sense of belonging and school engagement of secondary school students as indicators of socio-emotional learning. Given this position, it is appropriate to reject the null hypothesis. The moderate relationship implies that socio-emotional learning depends on some other complementary factors.

Discussion of Findings

The study examined the relationship between hidden curriculum and socio-emotional learning in secondary school students in Imo State.

Findings from table 1 provided strong empirical evidence that hidden curriculum is a critical determinant of socio-emotional learning based on the indicators used in this study such as students' social awareness and relationship skill. It revealed a near-perfect and statistically significant relationship between hidden curriculum and socio-emotional learning with a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.901$ and a significance value of $p = 0.021$. This strong positive association indicates an almost entirely predictive capacity of hidden curriculum on socio-emotional learning. This result aligns with previous scholarly findings that indicated between the two variables.

Table 2 showed the pearson coefficient value of $r = 0.519$ and probability, p of 0.025 which is lesser than the critical 0.05 significant level. This implies a moderate but significant relationship between hidden curriculum and socio-emotional learning as measured with sense of relationship and engagement skill of secondary school students in Imo state. This means that while hidden curriculum positively related with socio-emotional learning, its impact is not as overwhelming as it is in the previous result. This aligns with studies of Sunderia & Ayush (2014), Ajaegbu (2018) and Makera & Jonas (2023), who respectively concluded that hidden curriculum is a profound determinant of socio-emotional learning given the positive and significant link between the two variables. This implies that improvement in hidden curriculum must be accompanied by essential reforms to significantly enhance socio-emotional learning outcome. This finding is consistent with Obizue & Obizue (2025), who argued that negotiations and consultations with institutional support significantly maximizes the efficiency of social and emotional learning among students.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between hidden curriculum and socio-emotional learning and it was found that a strong relationship existed between the variables. This strong relationship confirms that learning in diverse classrooms extends beyond formal content. It is therefore concluded that when hidden curriculum is aligned with equity, respect and socio-emotional learning principles, it will become a lever for inclusive development and if not, the outcome will be undermined.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were proffered;

1. There should be regular classroom climate audits using student feedback, observation checklists and equity-focused protocols
2. Provision of professional development that will link socio-emotional learning competencies with cultural responsiveness

3. Revision of disciplinary and interaction policies and ensure rules are applied consistently across diverse student groups

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