

Null Curriculum in Institute of Education: Perspectives of the Graduate Student

Chenyu Cai

Zhejiang Financial College, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310018, China

Abstract: The present study adopts a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both questionnaire surveys and focus group interviews to explore the perspectives of graduate students within Chinese Taiwan's Institute of Education regarding the null curriculum. This research aims to identify significant but overlooked elements within the curriculum. The results underscore the students' recognition of essential yet absent components, highlighting the necessity for experiential and action-oriented courses such as educational practice and field visits, foundational educational methodologies, examination of challenges within the educational sphere, skill-oriented approaches, and anticipation of forthcoming educational trends. As a result, the implications of this study contribute to thought-provoking discussions within the field.

Keywords: Null curriculum; Institute of education; Graduate student perspective

1. Introduction

The term "null curriculum", also known as "empty curriculum," first appeared in Eisner's "The Educational Imagination" (1979, first edition). Eisner argued that previous curriculum studies focusing solely on the existing curriculum were insufficient. The null curriculum points to a void beyond the existing curriculum, referring to those areas excluded or overlooked in school education—beneficial for personal development but not included in the school curriculum, potentially resulting in students lacking relevant skills and knowledge.^[1] Some scholars interpret it as content that does not exist in school education, content that students do not have the opportunity to learn in school, or important content that schools should teach but are omitted or lacking.^[2-4] The omissions in missing courses can be categorized into three types: intellectual processes overlooked by school education, content or subjects omitted from the curriculum, and affective development.^[4-5] This paper primarily focuses on the content and subject-level omissions in the curriculum, specifically exploring important subjects or topics not included in the actual curriculum.

2. Research Design and Process

2.1 Data Source

This study surveyed current graduate students in the Department of Education at National Chengchi University in Chinese Taiwan. The data collection involved the distribution of questionnaires and the conduction of interviews to gather the perspectives of graduate students. The research aimed to explore "important but omitted or lacking learning content" in the current curriculum of the Department of Education as perceived by graduate students.

Regarding the questionnaires, a total of 92 were distributed with 81 returned, resulting in an 89.01% response rate. For the interviews, 25 graduate students were selected based on sample grade distribution, gender, and their willingness to participate. Group interviews, conducted, each comprising 5 members and lasting approximately 60-90 minutes per session. After the interviews, the recordings will be transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.2 Code analysis

In this study, we employed lexical data analysis, complemented by the use of Nvivo software, to encode and analyze the research data. The research process began with empirical observations, focusing on investigating issues within the lexical "context." No theoretical assumptions were made and an open-minded approach was maintained towards analyzing the "suspended curriculum" in the viewpoints of the research subjects through textual analysis.^[6] The essence of the coding primarily lies in the frequency with which a particular concept is mentioned and acknowledged by the research subjects, rather than the relative weight it holds. Individual thought images behind each concept for each research subject will be crucial data for subsequent analysis in this study. The specific encoding method and process are outlined as follows:

2.2.1 Initial coding phase

(1) Labeling: systematically examining the content of the data, extracting keywords, and temporarily assigning labels to data where keywords cannot be directly extracted.

(2) Exclusion of non-conformities: screening out data that does not align with the research questions, thereby excluding them from coding and analysis.

(3) Consolidation of synonymous terms: merging words in the data that differ in wording but bear highly similar meanings. Specific descriptions of research subjects under practical courses are initially not consolidated. The focus remains on the text itself, retaining their original codes.

2.2.2 Second stage of coding

(1) Principle of Categorization: Revisiting and analyzing the data to identify the attributes and semantic properties of the initial stage coding. This involves grouping codes with similar or high relevance into the same category.

(2) Cross-Validation of Coding: Engaging scholars and graduate students to review and assist in establishing a categorical checklist.

(3) Review of Singular Codes: Analyzing lexical data that appears only once to determine whether to maintain independent categories or, under reasonable circumstances, to incorporate them into existing categories or establish new ones after reconceptualization.

(4) Treatment of Summarizing Codes: Summary expressions within the coding, such as “interdisciplinary” or “more humanistic education”, are also included in the count. The primary consideration here is whether these codes reflect graduate students’ reflections on deficiencies or lack of diversity within existing courses.

3. Research findings and discussion

The graduate study identified a total of 39 categories of “important but overlooked” course vocabulary materials after coding and categorization (Table 1). Among these, the “missing courses” collected through questionnaires were predominantly related to specific subject areas, while interviews delved into specific learning content, meanings, and interpretations, resulting in richer and more ambiguous responses. Overall, graduate students perceived the missing course content to be primarily characterized by the following distribution of features:

3.1 Orientation towards Action and Practical traits

The study revealed that graduate students expressed a strong preference for practical and experiential courses, considering these contents to be the most lacking within the curriculum. Responses such as “practical courses,” “linking theory with practice,” “educational internships and visits,” “educational fieldwork,” “practical application and operation,” “school establishment and design,” “enterprise leadership and management,” and “educational entrepreneurship” all fall into this category. “Educational internships and visits,” were separately listed due to their high frequency of mention, emphasizing experiential learning and broadening perspectives. Through the analysis of interview data, it was found that graduate students mainly referred to “educational internships and visits” as courses that provide short-term visits to “schools,” “educational administrative units or departments,” and related “educational institutions,” emphasizing experiential learning and broadening perspectives. Conversely, “practical courses” place more emphasis on the nature of research, with students expecting these courses to involve research purposes and issues, entering specific educational settings for practical experience. Overall, graduate students strongly desire and expect opportunities to engage in firsthand practice, operation, and insight, in order to understand the demands and expectations related to the actual teaching ecology and the education industry.

3.2 Education Principles and Values Orientation

Graduate students have expressed a demand for exploration of educational principles, values, and patterns, coupled with a critical thinking aspect. This demand is evident in their references to categories such as “educational philosophy,” “epistemology,” “educational anthropology,” “educational history,” “educational aesthetics,” “psychology,” and “humanistic education.” Among these, courses related to the history and philosophy of education and psychology are mentioned most frequently. This is partly related to the professional backgrounds of the surveyed individuals, as nearly 70% of them lacked a certain foundation in educational theory or history of philosophy before entering the field of education research. Additionally, the course arrangements within the departments have had an impact. As expressed in the interviews, “Our course on ‘Educational Theory and Methods’ is taught by three different instructors over a semester, with each allocated five weeks. Many topics often cannot be thoroughly explored due to time constraints” (Interview Data 02). Furthermore, it was noted that “some history and philosophy of education courses are only offered at the undergraduate level, with limited exposure at the graduate level” (Interview Data 03). Additionally, it was observed that “the courses on the history and philosophy of education for master’s and doctoral students do not exhibit a clear hierarchical structure” (Interview Data 04). Overall, there appears to be insufficient emphasis on methodological and foundational courses within the research institute.

3.3 Guided by Awareness of Educational Field Issues

Drawing from their understanding of the educational field, graduate students primarily focus on the professional knowledge and skills required within the educational context. They specifically mention: (1) Aspects related to curriculum and instruction, such as “curriculum development and design,” “classroom management,” “comparative curriculum studies,” and “teaching-related issues.” (2) The teacher-student relationship, including “parent-teacher-student relationships,” “teaching professionals,” and “learner research.” (3) Family education, encompassing topics like “parental involvement in education,” “how to become good parents,” and “parenting education.”

Researchers categorize all of the above under the subject matter of “discussion of educational field issues.” Given that two-thirds of the interviewees have experience in teaching at primary and secondary levels, the topics they identify as lacking are likely based on their own experiences and perceptions within the teaching environment. Additionally, non-mainstream courses such as “multiculturalism and gender,” “new and indigenous education,” “issues of racial discrimination,” and “underprivileged education” also fall under this classification. From the interview data, it is evident that graduate students propose these areas based on encountering students from different races and cultures in their classrooms, which has brought about pedagogical challenges, leading them to realize the urgent need to understand these issues in their graduate education. The areas of deficiency identified by graduate students may also provide us with a glimpse into the educational landscape at the frontline of Chinese Taiwan’s educational context.

3.4 Orientation towards Educational Research Abilities

Regarding the deficient courses that graduate students should possess from an educational research perspective, areas such as “thesis writing” and “educational program composition” are considered. Students express the need for specialized courses that provide guidance for thesis writing, emphasizing that such guidance enhances critical thinking and issue identification skills. They highlight that existing research report writing requirements often lack in-depth exploration, contemplation, and organization related to the subject matter, indicating a need for a more comprehensive approach to research writing. These perspectives reveal the necessity for graduate students to develop their abilities in writing, critical thinking, issue identification, and the uncertainty in finding research directions within educational research. Furthermore, students emphasize the importance of cultivating “expressive ability,” “independent thinking,” “reflection, criticism,” “self-directed learning,” “logical thinking and analysis,” and “teamwork.” Some viewpoints even suggest that possessing “independent research and learning abilities” might alleviate deficiencies in certain courses.

3.5 Adapting to Current and Future Educational Trends

Graduate students’ perspectives on “deficient courses” arise not only from their own interests and needs, but also from an awareness of potential significant yet unrecognized content related to current and future educational trends. Notably, “experimental education” emerges as a frequently mentioned area observed by graduate students in the context of Chinese Taiwan’s educational development and reform. They express the need for a course on how to run a school, recognizing the potential for independent school establishment following the passage of the “Experimental Education Act.” The legislation on experimental education in Chinese Taiwan has promoted the emergence of experimental forms of education in schools and non-school-based settings, as well as the rise of entrusted private education. However, considering the serious issue of declining birth rates in Chinese Taiwan and the increasing number of parents choosing home education, the likelihood of a surge in establishing schools in the future remains open to debate. Nevertheless, the experiences of existing experimental schools, their management, educational faculty, and the challenges they face are all deemed worthy of attention and research.

In contemplating the future implications of deficient courses, graduate students’ perspectives encompass various themes such as “Education and Technology,” “Globalized Education,” “International Education,” and “Future Education.” They advocate for the incorporation of practical educational technologies within the curriculum and emphasize critical reflection on the relationship between technology and humanity. Additionally, the express concerns related to global educational issues, International Education trends and aspire to envision potential changes and challenges that future education may encounter.

Overall, graduate students demonstrate a keen awareness of current and future educational trends, advocating for a curriculum that not only addresses technological advancements but also encompasses global and futuristic perspectives, thereby preparing students for the evolving landscape of education.

Table 1: Deficient Courses from the Perspectives of Graduate Students

Category Ranking	Frequency	Category Ranking	Frequency	Category Ranking	Frequency
Experimental Education	23	Aesthetic Education	6	Learner Studies	4
Educational Internships and Visits	20	School Establishment	6	Knowledge and Methodology	4
Philosophy of Education	18	Multiculturalism	6	Holistic Education	4

Category Ranking	Frequency	Category Ranking	Frequency	Category Ranking	Frequency
Relevant Psychology	18	Special Education	6	International Education	4
Practical Courses	14	Educational Field	6	Expression and Debate	4
Teaching-related	14	Educational Thought	5	Educational Innovation	4
Counseling Courses	12	Educational Entrepreneurship	5	Educational Administration	4
History of Education	10	Parent-Teacher-Student Relationship	5	Education and Economy	4
Gender Education	8	Thesis Writing	5	Humanistic Education	4
Parenting Education	8	Teaching Staff	5	Civic Education	3
Theory and Practice Connection	7	Teacher Training Research	5	Self-directed Learning Ability	3
Globalization of Education	7	Educational Reform	5	Educational Leadership	3
Thinking and Analysis	6	Future Education	5	Adult Education	3

4. Conclusion

As direct beneficiaries of the course content, graduate students play a pivotal role as the primary evaluators of the scientific rationality of the curriculum. They wield direct discourse rights concerning the depth, cutting-edge nature, and interdisciplinary aspects of the course content. The key finding of this study is the identification of significant yet overlooked learning content, as perceived by graduate students from educational research institutes in Chinese Taiwan. These encompass “educational practical experience and practical nature, education principles and value orientation, education field problem awareness orientation, education research capability orientation, and alignment with current and future educational trends.”

These perspectives offer valuable insights into the entities perceived by the speakers during their engagement or participation, as well as their attention to or expectations of these entities. Furthermore, these perspectives shed light on the disparity between the course content and audience experience, as well as the resistance and challenges faced by the curriculum. These aspects warrant further analysis in subsequent research directions. Overall, graduate students’ viewpoints serve as a crucial guide for refining and reshaping curriculum content, ensuring its relevance and resonance with the evolving landscape of educational needs and aspirations.

References

- [1] Eisner, E. W. *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*[M]. Stanford University, 1979: 97-107.
- [2] Flinders, D. J., Noddings, N., & Thornton, S. J. *The null curriculum: Its theoretical basis and practical implications*[J]. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 1986: 16(1), 33-42.
- [3] Steven. S. *Professionalization and the Null Curriculum: The Case of the Popular Eugenics Movement and American Educational Studies*[J]. *Educational Studies*, 1987: 18 (2).
- [4] Huang, G. X. *Curriculum and Teaching*[M]. Taipei, Shida Bookstore. 1996: 27.
- [5] Huang, Z. J. *Curriculum Development and Design*[M]. Taipei, Donghua, 1991.
- [6] Huang, Y. Y., & Du, Y. Z. *Missing Courses in General Education: Perspectives of College Students*[J]. *Educational Administration Research*, 2015, 5(2), 21-56.

Acknowledgements: Research Funding Project of the Education Department of Zhejiang Province: The Application and Exploration of Null Curriculum Theory in Higher Education Curriculum Reform. (Project number: Y202043341)