

Beyond content: Teaching the hidden curriculum for newcomer students

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This narrative inquiry explores how newcomer students navigated the hidden curriculum of U.S. high schools as they learned English and academic content. Participants' stories show that unspoken classroom norms and school-system rules can become gatekeepers when they are assumed rather than taught. The manuscript argues that teaching these expectations explicitly is an equity practice that helps newcomer students thrive.

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Introduction

Newcomer students – recently arrived immigrant youth who are still learning English while adjusting to U.S. schooling – often enter classrooms with significant strengths, including multilingual repertoires, prior knowledge, strong family responsibility, and resilience. Yet many are asked to demonstrate learning inside a system whose rules are not always explained. Guidance commonly describes newcomers as foreign-born students who have arrived in the United States within the previous three years and who need targeted support to navigate school routines and expectations alongside language development (Office of English Language Acquisition [OELA], 2023, as cited in WIDA, 2026).

In many schools, support is concentrated on the visible curriculum: standards, lesson objectives, texts, assignments, and language targets. That “official” curriculum matters. However, this study shows that students’ participation and performance were often shaped by the hidden curriculum – the unwritten norms that govern how learning is supposed to happen, how students are expected to behave, and how success is measured (Free & Križ, 2022). When these norms remain implicit, newcomers may appear disengaged or unprepared while they are actually doing the extra work of decoding expectations for discussion, group work, presentations, and classroom interaction.

Recent research underscores that teaching the hidden curriculum is an equity issue, not an add-on, because schools can strongly shape newcomer outcomes – especially early on (Umansky et al., 2022). Hidden curriculum also operates through school systems and pathways: multilingual learners’ college access depends not only on academic ability but also on access to guidance about testing, timelines, and institutional processes (Jiang & Harklau, 2024; Li & Kanno, 2025). Finally, culturally grounded ways of showing respect can be misread as negative behavior when educators interpret students through a single cultural lens, with consequences for belonging and discipline (Kehl et al., 2024). This narrative inquiry examines how newcomers

navigated hidden curriculum in both classroom practices and school systems, and what it means to make those expectations teachable so students can thrive.

Data collection and participants

This study used narrative inquiry to understand how newcomer students from Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and Burma/Myanmar experienced high school in the United States and how they made meaning of those experiences over time. Narrative inquiry was appropriate because the focus was not only on what happened to students in classrooms and schools, but also on how students interpreted those moments, how they connected events across time, and how they now understand what supported – or constrained – their learning and belonging.

Five participants were interviewed as college students, and each participant narrated experiences from high school. College students were purposefully selected because the distance from high school and their maturity level supported deeper reflection; participants were able to name patterns, identify turning points, and describe how they now interpret experiences that were confusing or emotionally charged at the time. Four participants in particular described their experiences as newcomers during 10th and 11th grades in U.S. high schools. These participants came from different countries and educational backgrounds: Ghassan (Iraq), Samira (Syria), Naeema (Somalia), and Moses (Burma/Myanmar).

Each participant completed two semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 50–60 minutes and were designed to invite detailed storytelling about school routines, classroom practices, relationships with teachers and peers, and moments that shaped students' participation and academic performance. The second interview offered an opportunity to revisit earlier narratives, clarify details, and deepen reflection after participants had time to think back on their experiences. After interviews were completed, the narratives were interpreted and analyzed to identify shared patterns across students' stories, with particular attention to how hidden curriculum expectations in classroom practices and school systems influenced participants' experiences as newcomers.

Findings and discussion: Hidden curriculum as the work of “figuring school out”

Across participants' stories, hidden curriculum surfaced as a daily form of figuring school out: learning the unwritten rules of participation, respect, movement, assessment, and access to support. Newcomers' academic performance was shaped by everyday routines and expectations that were rarely taught directly, including group work norms, when and how to speak up, how to interpret frequent handouts and presentations, how to navigate the building, and how to understand school-system knowledge tied to schedules, grade point average (GPA), counseling roles, and high-stakes tests. Participants did not describe themselves as unwilling learners; rather,

they described the extra and often invisible labor of decoding what others already knew, along with the anxiety and hesitation that followed when mistakes felt socially or academically costly. This article, therefore, frames hidden curriculum as a teachable dimension of equitable practice. Teaching it does not mean lowering rigor or replacing academic content; it means removing unnecessary opacity so newcomers can show what they know, build confidence, and participate as full members of the classroom community.

Classroom participation and respect were unwritten rules

Several participants described classroom routines in U.S. schools as unfamiliar and sometimes disorienting. Beyond content, they had to learn what “participation” looks like, how group work functions, and how students are expected to demonstrate learning through talk and performance. For Samira and Naeema, group work was especially confusing because it was not a routine they had practiced in their prior schooling. As Samira explained, “Sometimes I didn’t understand why I had to work with others and I felt embarrassed not knowing what to do, whether I had to say something or be quiet and I was not comfortable enough to speak because all students were native English speakers and so it was very confusing” (Samira, October 30, interview). Naeema echoed this uncertainty: “group work is no clear. Everything is like confusing, who speak, who become leader in group or I speak or no and I was very stress but the teacher, my ESL teacher help me so much learn how I work in group work” (Naeema, October 30, interview). These accounts show that group work is not just an instructional strategy; it carries hidden expectations about roles, turn-taking, leadership, and what counts as contribution. When those norms are not taught, newcomers may withdraw to avoid public mistakes, and their knowledge stays invisible – even when they have strong ideas and relevant experiences to contribute.

Hidden curriculum also operated through unspoken expectations about “appropriate” behavior and respect. Moses’s experience illustrates how quickly cultural meanings can be misread in U.S. classrooms. He described lowering his gaze and crossing his arms as respectful in his cultural context, yet the teacher interpreted it as disrespect: “the teacher ask me why I not look at her and she is very mad but in my culture I respect when I don’t look at you or cross my arms but my teacher don’t understand” (Moses, October 30, interview). His story highlights a critical point: when teachers assume one cultural script for respect, difference can become discipline. The result is not only a moment of conflict; it can reshape classroom relationships and reduce students’ willingness to participate in discussion, ask questions, or take academic risks. In this sense, hidden curriculum is not only academic – it is relational and embodied, shaping whether students feel safe enough to be visible as learners.

Navigating the system-shaped performance

Participants also described the school system itself as a hidden curriculum. Samira’s narrative makes visible how something as basic as understanding movement between classes can shape attendance and belonging. She described staying in one classroom because she assumed teachers

would rotate, and she was marked absent because she did not know the system: “I was lost. I mean, I did not know anything about how classes worked and that students moved around classrooms but in my school experiences, the teachers came to our classrooms and we stayed in class, but it was different in the U.S and so I was not sure what to do” (Samira, October 30, interview). This is not a small confusion; it shows how institutional routines can convert unfamiliarity into records and labels. The school reads the student’s location as compliance, while the student experiences it as uncertainty and vulnerability. In a system where attendance is monitored and tracked, a newcomer can become “absent” even while trying to be present.

Moses described similar disorientation during his first week, but what shifted his experience was an ESL teacher’s practical “system translation.” When she saw him walking around lost, she marked classrooms with colors and matched his schedule to those color codes. This detail matters because it shows what effective support looks like: not blaming the student for not knowing, but designing the environment so the system becomes legible. For newcomers, these supports reduce cognitive overload and make the building feel navigable rather than threatening. They also communicate care in a concrete way – help that is not abstract encouragement, but a pathway the student can follow.

Pathways and gatekeepers were learned too late

A third pattern was the late discovery of gatekeeping mechanisms tied to college and future options – tests, GPA systems, and access to key school personnel. Several participants said they learned about the SAT too late to prepare meaningfully. Ghassan explained:

One of the biggest challenge for me was the SAT test. I mean, this was a very important thing to the students, but you know, they did not announce it ahead of time or gave us a prep test or anything like that. I did not know what's the test like or anything like that. Not even my ESL teachers told us about it, or maybe they did but it was not a big deal, so we didn't really think it was that important. (Ghassan, October 30, interview).

His account shows how information is unevenly distributed. When schools assume students will “pick it up,” newcomers may face high-stakes moments unprepared – not because they lack ability, but because they lack access to timely explanations. Naeema’s experience echoes the same surprise and stakes: “ I am shocked when my teacher say you take SAT test. Why I take it? My teacher say I cannot go to college or something like that, but I don’t do good in SAT because it is very difficult” (Naeema, October 30, interview). In both stories, the emotional impact is visible: confusion becomes anxiety, and anxiety can be mistaken for incapacity. These accounts suggest that “readiness” is not only a student trait; it is produced by whether schools provide early, clear, repeated guidance about timelines, preparation, and why a test matters.

The same pattern appeared with GPA and school roles. Samira described the difficulty of understanding a GPA system that was unfamiliar and consequential: “GPA is out of 100 in my country and it’s very straightforward to calculator, but I found it very confusing to think of a

GPA out of 4 and so it was not an easy thing, but I finally got it but I think it was too late after I found out my GPA was affected by the other years” (Samira, October 30, interview). Ghassan also emphasized how not understanding school roles limited access to support: “I wish I knew what the counselor did because I had so many questions for her and I needed to talk to someone because of some confusion I was facing, but I don’t think any of my teachers prepared or talked to me about her or any other people in school” (Ghassan, October 30, interview). Together, these narratives show that hidden curriculum is not only about classroom routines; it is also about knowing the pathways, gatekeepers, and resources that shape opportunity. When students do not know what counselors do, what tutoring is for, or how to use available supports, help exists “in the building” but not in the student’s lived reality.

What these stories suggest

Taken together, the findings point to one central implication: newcomers thrive when educators treat the hidden curriculum as teachable knowledge rather than assumed common sense. In classrooms, that means making participation visible – teaching how group work works, clarifying what counts as contribution, and interpreting culturally different signs of respect with care rather than quick judgment. Practical moves can include explicitly teaching group roles (e.g., facilitator, recorder, reporter), modeling what it sounds like to enter a discussion, and giving newcomers language options for joining conversation in ways that reduce public risk. When teachers preview what “participation” will look like that day and offer low-stakes entry points, students can show engagement without having to guess the rules.

At the system level, it means teaching students how schedules, attendance, tests, GPA, and support roles function – early enough to matter. This can look like walking students through schedule navigation during the first weeks, explaining what to do if they are lost, and naming who does what in the building (counselor, registrar, nurse) so students know where questions belong. It also includes demystifying pathways by explaining, in plain language, what the SAT is, why it matters, and what preparation options exist, rather than assuming students will learn through peers or last-minute announcements. Finally, making tutoring visible – how to access it, when it happens, and why it is normal to use – can shift support from being available in theory to being accessible in practice.

The participants’ stories suggest that clarity is not a small gesture; it is instructional equity. When the rules are made visible, students spend less energy guessing and more energy learning, participating, and planning for futures that the system too often keeps opaque. Just as importantly, explicit teaching of these norms communicates belonging: it tells newcomers that the school expects them to succeed and is willing to share the knowledge that makes success possible.

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Author bio

Yacoub Aljaffery arrived in the United States in 1996 as a teenager after fleeing wars and living in refugee camps. His journey through the public school system was shaped by both supportive teachers and personal struggles. Inspired by his ESL teacher, he pursued higher education, eventually becoming an ESL teacher himself. His doctoral research focused on refugee students, and he continues to study their experiences while educating future teachers. He has published book chapters amplifying refugee students' voices and remains committed to asset-based perspectives in education. His own five years without formal schooling in a refugee camp deeply inform his work.

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