

MATATAG Curriculum: Why Curriculum [must] Change?

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum changes dovetail with societal needs and advancements. As the world evolves, the educational landscape adapts to prepare students effectively. Technological progress, globalization, political acumen, and shifts in societal values necessitate updates to curriculum content and paradigms. This paper stimulates a macro-sociological vista on the MATATAG curriculum in the Philippine context. This revised curriculum, effective from the school year 2024 to 2025, addresses challenges faced by the current K to 12 curriculum, including numerous contents, misplaced prerequisite learning competencies, social inequities, and imbalances in thinking demands. This paper advances discourse regarding the adaptation to humanized learning and addresses the shortcomings of existing systems. In essence, curriculum changes are not just a response to challenges but a proactive stance for the demands of ever-changing needs. Although the context of the MATATAG agenda is not a mere blank ideation, it can be considered a national movement. Undeniably, education cannot be put at stake here because it determines what and how the Philippine nation will become in the next generation.

Keywords: MATATAG curriculum; Philippine education; Curriculum change.

Introduction

Curriculum change is not just rearranging decks of cards; it is the wind in the sails of societal progress. A stagnant curriculum is akin to beating a dead horse, futile and counterproductive. Similarly, an outdated curriculum risks leaving students ill-prepared for the dynamic challenges of the modern world. Embracing curriculum change is not reinventing the wheel; it is ensuring the educational vehicle can navigate the winding roads of innovation. While these generalizations can be ostensibly true, argument-wise, change is a double-edged sword here; circumstances would tell – one may face progress, and the other will face the downturn. This paper stimulates discussions on the incessant call for curriculum change echoing the premise that education is a volatile entity, perpetually adapting to the evolving demands of the world it seeks to prepare learners for.

A snippet of the MATATAG curriculum

A reconfigured, decongest curriculum catapulted on August 10, 2023, as headed by Vice President Sarah Duterte and Secretary of the Department of Education (DepEd). This is earmarked by recalibrating the current K to 12 curriculum. The MATATAG Agenda aims to cultivate competent, job-ready, active, responsible, and patriotic citizens. This revised K to 10 curriculum reduces the existing K to 12 curriculum's congestion by 70%, streamlining competencies and emphasizing essential elements such as language, reading, literacy, mathematics, patriotism (MAKABANSA), and good manners and right conduct from kindergarten to grade 10. The new curriculum introduces Filipino and English in grade 2, science in grade 3, and social studies, music, arts, and physical education in grade 4. Notably, 'Mother Tongue' and other humanities are excluded. It is expected to be scheduled for phased implementation from August 2024 to 2028.

MATATAG aims to make the curriculum relevant for employability, active, and responsible citizens, accelerate basic education services, promote learner well-being and inclusiveness, and provide support for teachers. The current framework, Republic Act No. 10533 or the Enhanced Basic Education Act, increased the number of years of basic education, introducing senior high school (grades 11 to 12) from 2012 to 2013. Critics questioned the revision's fairness, citing alignment with international standards and the Philippines' previous status as one of the few nations not following a 12-year basic education cycle. Factors of societal change and research prompting the need for curriculum revision. It did not happen in the blink of an eye, surely, the decision to revise received thorough consideration from a diverse group of 1,168 collaborators, including DepEd specialists, teachers, consultants, external parties, and international experts (Escuadro, 2023). The endorsement reflects a commitment to streamline implementation and ensure learners' adaptability to this transformative journey, emphasizing the educational community's dedication to political motives.

Why curriculum change?

One would think that curriculum change is an inevitable process driven by the imperfections in existing curricula and the constant need to adapt to the evolving economic, technological, social, political, and ideological landscape. These factors manifest at various levels: minor changes involve adjustments in subject content, learning activities, and personnel; medium changes integrate subjects or introduce new approaches; major changes entail a complete overhaul of the conceptual design, including alterations in structure, content, methods, approaches, and simplicity (Fullan, 2007). Shifts in resources and facilities can also prompt entirely new curriculum plans. The agencies involved in curriculum change encompass institutes of education, curriculum development centers, research institutes, educational institutions at various levels, departments of education, publishing companies, school districts, stakeholders, and communities at large. As initial recall, curriculum change is a subset of educational change, focusing specifically on adjustments to what is taught in classrooms—updates to subject content, instructional methods, and assessment strategies aimed at enhancing student learning outcomes unlike educational change referring to broad modifications in the entire education system, including policies, teaching methods, and administrative structures (Lowry, 1992). For this reason, the scope of this paper will only deal with the curriculum as a stance of educational reform in the Philippines.

Comprehending shifts in curriculum necessitates an exploration of concepts at play within or amidst various policy domains. Unveiling the manifestation of ideas across different arenas to arrive at the MATATAG agenda concept implies that this analytical phase functions on a vertical plane which does not happen overnight. Subsequently, the next stride involves pinpointing the actors involved, understanding how they articulate policy challenges, and examining their justifications for specific remedies (Giddens, 1984). These analytical constructs operate more horizontally where change happens on the surroundings or concurrent factors such as outside influence, external initiatives, and research reports; to laymanize, every change does not occur without purpose or priorities to raise, and the change happens by reflecting on past circumstances like past data and other assessment indicators.

Some curriculum changes are rapid and sudden, some can be micro and on the national scale scope or can be coined as macro. At the micro level, curriculum changes manifest within the nuances of classroom settings and textbook content. Educators, responding to pedagogical research and changing student needs, might introduce micro-level changes in instructional methods and materials. Classroom practices, assessment strategies, and the incorporation of diverse perspectives reflect micro-level adaptations that contribute to the dynamic nature of education. In the Philippines, micro-level changes might involve the integration of local content into lessons or the implementation of innovative teaching techniques.

On the other hand, macro-level changes have a wide-ranging impact, influencing the entire education system. In the Philippines for instance, the shift to a K-12 system from the previous 10-year basic education cycle exemplifies a macro-level change. This reform aimed to align the country's educational system with international standards and globalization, enhance the employability of graduates, and address long-standing issues in the education sector. Perhaps, the macro-level changes often necessitate adjustments in infrastructure, teacher training, and educational resources to accommodate the expanded scope of the curriculum.

With a cursory look at the history of Philippine education, it is marked by a complex interplay of colonial influences, cultural shifts, and educational reforms. During Spanish colonization in the 16th century, education was primarily ecclesiastical, imparted by friars, and geared towards religious indoctrination. The arrival of the Americans in the late 19th century brought significant changes, introducing a more secular and modern system. The Thomasites, a group of American teachers, played a pivotal role in shaping the early curriculum. Consequently, Post-independence, the Philippines witnessed successive educational policies, including the bilingual policy and the Education for All (EFA) program. The educational reforms continued, influenced by post-war reconstruction. Presidents Roxas, Quirino, and Garcia contributed to the evolution of the curriculum, with an emphasis on nationalism. However, the Martial Law era under Ferdinand Marcos saw the adoption of the New Society Education Program, emphasizing national discipline and vocational training. After its administration, in the 1990s, the Philippines underwent a significant educational reform with the establishment of the Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM). The EDCOM, formed in 1991, was tasked with reviewing the entire education system and recommending comprehensive reforms. The commission's findings led to the passage of the Republic Act No. 7722, also known as the Higher Education Act of 1994, and Republic Act No. 7796, or the Technical Education and Skills Development Act of 1994. These legislative acts aimed to enhance the quality of higher education and technical-vocational training in the country. The EDCOM's recommendations also

highlighted the need for more learner-centered and outcomes-based education. After the EDCOM the Department of Education, Culture, and Sports (DECS) was established, marking a shift towards a more integrated approach to education and culture. Although the primary focus of EDCOM was on higher education, its recommendations had broader implications, influencing subsequent educational policies and contributing to the ongoing evolution of the Philippine education system. In 2001, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo split the Department of Education, Culture, and Sports into two separate entities: the Department of Education (DepEd) and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). This move aimed to enhance the focus on education and streamline administrative functions. Over the years, DepEd has undergone various reforms to address issues such as curriculum relevance, quality of education, and accessibility.

The 21st century witnessed a huge shift with the advent of the K-12 program, extending basic education to 12 years, and adding senior years to strengthen readiness to the workforce or competencies for tertiary levels. In recent, traversing to post-pandemic, the Philippines introduced the MATATAG curriculum, focusing on relevance, efficiency, learner well-being, and teacher support to produce job-ready, active, and responsible citizens, to say the least. Arguably, the history of Philippine education reflects a curriculum evolution shaped by cultural, colonial, and socio-political forces, with each era leaving its imprint on the curriculum to meet the changing needs and demands of the nation.

Of course change does not happen overnight that is why the term "cascading" in the context of curriculum play a systematic and hierarchical dissemination of educational policies, guidelines, or changes from the upper echelons of the educational hierarchy to the lower levels. This top-down approach involves the formulation of educational policies and curriculum changes by authorities, such as education officials and policymakers. Following policy establishment, a deliberate communication effort is undertaken to convey decisions throughout the organizational hierarchy, reaching school administrators, teachers, and students. Subsequently, at the grassroots level, when taken seriously, these communicated policies are implemented, necessitating adjustments in teaching methods, instructional materials, and assessment strategies to align with the new curriculum. This process incorporates a feedback loop wherein lower-level stakeholders offer insights and challenges, providing valuable information for further refinement or adjustments at higher levels. The cascading approach ensures standardized and coordinated implementation of educational policies, fostering a clear chain of command and communication within the organizational structure, particularly in educational institutions like the Department of Education (DepEd). This can be best explained by Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory (1962) which explores how new ideas, practices, or innovations spread within a social system. The theory identifies different adopter categories, ranging from innovators to laggards, and emphasizes the importance of communication channels in the dissemination process.

It is noteworthy here to include components from the curriculum innovations, which are essential for adapting to societal changes and introducing elements into the curriculum. Innovations are said to align educational goals, reflecting the needs, interests, values, and problems of society (Goodson, 2013). They should be appropriate, economical in terms of time, space, and resources, and rooted in sound educational theory. Ronald Havelock (1969) identified three main models of innovation: the Research, Development, and Diffusion (RD&D) model, the Social Interaction (SI) model, and the Problem-Solving (PS) model. These models provide frameworks for understanding how changes are introduced, interacting with stakeholders, and becoming integrated into educational practices. Wherein, any curriculum cannot be just plain implemented without acknowledging several factors at play. While substantial contributions to both policymakers and academic circles regarding "curriculum change" are evident on the surface, it is contended that these contemporary analyses of curricula from a modernist standpoint, rooted in functionalistic reasoning, rely on questionable foundations. Curriculum change, however, within a globally interconnected society marked by diverse and sometimes conflicting rationalities, creating a more profound analysis is warranted (Nordin, A. & Sundberg, D., 2018; Priestley, M., 2011). Despite its widespread endorsement by politicians, think tanks, and mass media, the neo-positivist presumption of a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship between policy formulation and implementation shaping the outcome has been significantly challenged in current discussions on curriculum studies.

In addition, contemporary curricula face a continuous challenge, of new uncertainties. An analysis of these uncertainties and their implications for curriculum change, this paper turns to critical realism since the theoretical framework is grounded in the concept of 'in-depth ontology,' characterized by two dimensions: a compound conception of reality and the notion of a stratified society with successive layers emerging from those below. Central to this analysis are the concepts of 'emergence' and 'social interaction.' Simply put, the MATATAG curriculum is an embodiment of what and how Philippine society is structured considering the functions and conflicts of ideological priorities. But when it comes to perspective, Wood and Butt (2014) contribute valuable insights into the dual role of teachers as both contributors to the curriculum's substance and facilitators of curriculum change within the classroom context must take into account. Wherein, the curriculum does change, when teachers tend to do so. Also, drawing from Gidden's structural theory (1991), time-space distancing, highlighting the compression of time and space, is relevant to understanding how educational change unfolds. The MATATAG curriculum, as a product of modern educational reforms, reflects the influence of technological advancements, globalization, and the changing dynamics of the educational landscape in the Philippines.

Of note, educational evolution not only tackles its changes, regardless how its notability but on the lenses of people. The discourse on curriculum change can presumably unfold through three distinct lenses or more. The conservative lens, akin to a steadfast anchor, resists the winds of change, refusing to embrace the transformative wave embodied by the MATATAG curriculum. On the flip side, two contrasting perspectives within the progressive spectrum emerge. The first, a submissive stance, echoes the sentiment of "whatever goes and woes will proceed," advocating for change without discernment. Meanwhile, the second, a more subtle group, accepts the MATATAG agenda but wears the cloak of skepticism. Like a discerning critic in the front row of a play, this viewpoint questions the streamline, prompting a critical dialogue on potential challenges of the proposed curriculum. In this tripartite dynamic, the conservative, the submissive, and the skeptical viewpoints converge and clash, forming the very crucible where the future of education is forged. These are normal vetting processes as sociological imagination is being catapulted, nevertheless, critique aligns with the ongoing discourse surrounding the curriculum, highlighting the need to scrutinize and reevaluate underlying assumptions in the pursuit of an education system suited to the complexities of problems.

A humanized education?

MATATAG, encapsulated by its acronym principles – strong or unyielding, aligns with the tenets of humanized education while also incorporating a significant focus on peace education. It places a strong emphasis on preparing students for real-world challenges, stressing adaptability to the evolving job market—a central goal of a responsive curriculum. Furthermore, commitment to accelerating education services is in harmony with the emphasis on technology and innovation, fostering a modern and dynamic learning environment. The dedication to inclusiveness, positive learning environments, and learner well-being in addressing socio-emotional needs for effective learning are a few factors involved. The support for teachers, recognizing their unwavering role and encouraging technology integration for enhanced teaching, mirrors harmony from its agenda. The integration of peace education into MATATAG further enhances its objectives. It can be noted that the curriculum reintroduces Good Manners and Right Conduct (GMRC) as a dedicated learning area or subject, in accordance with Republic Act (RA) 11476, also known as the GMRC and Values Education Act of 2020. Collectively prioritizing a learner-centric model that prepares individuals for academic success, active citizenship, and adaptability in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

Quo Vadis? One must reckon with the inherent volatility in the field of education, where every change in administration often translates to a shift in curriculum. Power dynamics and priorities, history, and self-interest play a fundamental role when tackled from different lenses, thus, lo and behold, explaining the curriculum change. The MATATAG curriculum is an interesting move, it can be seen in the humanized approach to learning while emphasizing five skills such as language, reading and literacy, mathematics, nationalism, and good manners and right conduct. However, some may look at it as a byproduct of political rebranding, and some to the extent of the spectrum may accept it as an ideal social reconstruction from the circumstances, nonetheless, positioning the curriculum as a self-claimed pragmatic vista, as the new blueprint. It may be good in the paper as initiatives but the concrete implementations remain at the surface as it is gradually being injected into the systems. Different societal actors and history may argue that the discourse should go beyond political realism and address the underlying socio-economic factors like learning poverty, classroom shortage and other forces while remaining steadfast and proactive to such changes.

Limitations

This commentary on the MATATAG curriculum acknowledges its limitations, primarily due to a focused lens, but aims to stimulate broader discussions. The scope does not encompass the entirety of the curriculum reflection, yet it aspires to instigate further exploration, reexamination, and dialogue on its various aspects for a thorough understanding of its implications.

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The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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