

The MATATAG Curriculum: Strengthening Foundational Skills and 21st-Century Competencies in the Philippine Education System

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Abstract:

The MATATAG Curriculum, implemented by the Philippine Department of Education, addresses long-standing challenges in the education system by prioritizing foundational skills, reducing academic pressures, and incorporating 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy. This study examines stakeholder feedback, revealing overwhelmingly positive responses from educators, students, and parents. Teachers commend the curriculum's streamlined structure, which allows for more focused and meaningful instruction, while students report feeling less overwhelmed and more engaged due to its emphasis on interactive learning and real-world applications. Parents express strong support for the curriculum's focus on literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development, particularly appreciating the inclusion of values education and peace competencies. Early evidence suggests that the MATATAG Curriculum fosters a more balanced, supportive learning environment, leading to enhanced student engagement and improved teaching practices. Moving forward, continuous evaluation and feedback from stakeholders will be crucial in refining the curriculum to meet evolving educational demands. This study contributes valuable insights into how the curriculum is reshaping Philippine education and preparing students for the challenges of a rapidly evolving global society.

Keywords: MATATAG Curriculum, foundational skills, 21st-century competencies,

Introduction:

The education system of the Philippines has undergone significant changes and faced several challenges in the past decade, reflecting a pressing need for reform. The 2018 results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) placed the Philippines at the bottom of the rankings for reading comprehension, mathematics, and science, with Filipino students scoring considerably below the global average (OECD, 2019). This poor performance signaled substantial deficiencies in the education system. In response to this crisis, the World Bank's 2022 report indicated that an alarming 91% of Filipino 10-year-olds struggled with basic reading comprehension, highlighting the urgency for immediate action (World Bank, 2022).

In light of these challenges, the Department of Education (DepEd) introduced the MATATAG Curriculum as part of a comprehensive strategy to improve educational outcomes. Designed to address foundational weaknesses in literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking, this curriculum aims to reduce the overwhelming academic load on students while emphasizing the importance of socio-emotional learning (SEL) and peace competencies (DepEd, 2023). The MATATAG Curriculum proposes a more focused approach, giving students and teachers the opportunity to delve deeper into essential learning areas, thereby promoting meaningful and sustained understanding.

This paper explores the development and potential impact of the MATATAG Curriculum, analyzing its core components and the rationale behind its design. It also evaluates how this reform can contribute to enhancing educational

standards, reducing student and teacher burnout, and preparing Filipino students to meet the demands of a rapidly changing global landscape.

Literature Review:

The challenges within the Philippine education system have become increasingly apparent in recent years. Poor performances in international assessments, such as PISA, and national examinations have revealed fundamental weaknesses in basic education. The previous K to 10 curriculum, which was widely criticized for its overly complex and content-heavy structure, left students and teachers struggling to cover a vast number of competencies in a limited timeframe. This left little room for mastery of essential skills, leading to diminished educational outcomes (OECD, 2020).

The alarming decline in educational performance, particularly in basic literacy and numeracy, prompted the DepEd to acknowledge the limitations of the existing curriculum and undertake reform efforts. The MATATAG Curriculum is envisioned as a response to the overload in the previous system, which overwhelmed students with numerous subjects and learning areas, limiting their ability to focus on key skills. By streamlining content and prioritizing literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development, the curriculum aims to rectify these systemic issues.

The MATATAG Curriculum draws on key educational theories to inform its design. Constructivist learning theories, which emphasize the role of students in actively constructing knowledge through hands-on learning and reflection, are central to the curriculum's approach (Bruner, 1960; Vygotsky, 1978). Rather than focusing on rote memorization and passive learning, the curriculum encourages critical thinking and collaboration. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which suggests that learning occurs through social interactions and guided participation, also informs the curriculum's emphasis on group work and peer-assisted learning.

Another critical aspect of the MATATAG Curriculum is the integration of socio-emotional learning (SEL). SEL highlights the importance of emotional intelligence, resilience, and interpersonal skills in academic and personal success (Goleman, 1995). The curriculum's focus on SEL reflects the growing recognition that education must address not only cognitive development but also the emotional and social competencies necessary for students to thrive in the 21st century.

Research has shown that an overburdened curriculum can increase anxiety among students and contribute to teacher burnout, reducing the overall effectiveness of the education system (OECD, 2020). The MATATAG Curriculum aims to alleviate this pressure by reducing the number of learning competencies, allowing for more in-depth exploration of key concepts, and offering teachers the flexibility to focus on student needs.

Methodology

To explore the development and anticipated impact of the MATATAG Curriculum, this study employed a qualitative research design. Data were collected through a review of official DepEd documents, policy briefs, and curriculum guides. These materials provided an in-depth understanding of the curriculum's structure, objectives, and underlying principles. Additionally, interviews and focus group discussions with educators and policy experts offered valuable insights into how the curriculum is being implemented and its potential effects on student learning outcomes.

Thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns and themes from the data. This method allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the curriculum's strengths and challenges, as well as its implications for students, teachers, and the broader education system.

Findings and Discussion

Focus on Foundational Skills

A key finding from this study is the MATATAG Curriculum's enhanced focus on foundational skills, particularly in literacy and numeracy. This shift is a direct response to persistent weaknesses observed among Filipino students, who have historically struggled in these areas, as evidenced by national and international assessments. By streamlining the curriculum and reducing the emphasis on content-heavy subjects, the MATATAG Curriculum creates space for teachers to concentrate on these essential skills, enabling a deeper and more thorough approach to instruction. The Department of Education (DepEd, 2023) emphasizes that this change is crucial for addressing the learning gaps that have long plagued the education system.

Classroom observations further demonstrate the effectiveness of this shift, with students showing marked improvements in both literacy and numeracy after the MATATAG Curriculum's implementation. Teachers reported that the reduced academic burden allowed them to focus more on foundational competencies, offering more engaging and interactive lessons. This approach not only facilitated higher levels of student engagement but also fostered



improved comprehension, as students were able to master key concepts without being overwhelmed by an excessive number of subjects.

Moreover, the MATATAG Curriculum's focus on foundational skills aligns with broader educational research, which underscores the importance of a concentrated approach to core competencies for long-term academic success. Scholars such as Ananiadou and Claro (2009) argue that foundational skills in literacy and numeracy serve as the building blocks for future learning. Without a strong foundation in these areas, students are likely to face difficulties in higher-level subjects, resulting in continued academic underachievement.

The benefits of this foundational focus extend beyond just academic performance. Teachers noted that by concentrating on fewer, more essential topics, they were able to employ more effective instructional strategies, including differentiated learning and personalized feedback. This approach caters to diverse learning styles and paces, allowing students to grasp foundational concepts more confidently. As a result, the learning environment became more supportive and conducive to student success.

The MATATAG Curriculum's prioritization of foundational skills addresses the most critical areas of student learning and provides a solid framework for improving educational outcomes in the Philippines. By enabling deeper engagement with literacy and numeracy, this shift lays the groundwork for sustained academic achievement and more meaningful learning experiences in the years to come.

Impact of Reducing Subjects and Competencies in the MATATAG Curriculum

The reduction in the number of subjects and learning competencies in the MATATAG Curriculum has brought significant positive changes for both students and teachers. Previously, the overwhelming academic load placed considerable pressure on students, often resulting in burnout and disengagement from their studies. With an excessive number of subjects to cover, students found it difficult to grasp and retain critical concepts, which ultimately affected their academic performance. Similarly, teachers were burdened with the challenge of covering the breadth of the old curriculum within limited instructional time, leading to superficial coverage of key topics. The introduction of a more streamlined curriculum has alleviated these pressures, creating an environment more conducive to meaningful and effective learning experiences.

For students, the lighter academic load has fostered a more positive learning environment, allowing them to engage more deeply with the material. The reduced number of subjects enables students to focus on mastering essential competencies rather than spreading their attention thinly across various topics. This change has contributed to greater comprehension and retention of knowledge, as students can now delve into core concepts without feeling overwhelmed by a heavy curriculum. By focusing on fewer subjects, students experience less stress and are more motivated to participate in their learning, which promotes a healthier academic experience overall.

Teachers have also benefited significantly from the MATATAG Curriculum's emphasis on fewer subjects and competencies. With the reduced workload, teachers now have more time to dedicate to each student's individual needs, offering personalized instruction and support. This shift has allowed educators to implement diverse instructional strategies tailored to different learning styles, which has led to improved student outcomes. The ability to focus on a smaller number of competencies means that teachers can provide more thorough explanations and engage students in deeper discussions, resulting in better knowledge retention and understanding. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) emphasize that these focused and diversified approaches are crucial for fostering student engagement and long-term academic success.

Furthermore, the MATATAG Curriculum has relieved teachers of the excessive workload they previously faced. The reduced number of competencies they are now responsible for covering allows them to invest more time in professional development, enhancing the quality of their teaching practices. Teachers expressed relief at the opportunity to refine their instructional methods, explore innovative teaching strategies, and participate in collaborative learning communities with their peers. This focus on continuous improvement has positively impacted classroom dynamics, with teachers feeling more confident and equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students (Sasan & kit Kilag, 2023).

The curriculum changes have also encouraged teachers to prioritize formative assessment and individualized feedback, leading to more meaningful interactions with students. With fewer subjects to cover, teachers can assess student progress more thoroughly and provide targeted support where needed. This shift has resulted in better identification of learning gaps and more effective interventions to address them (Uy, et al., 2023). The increased time available for reflection and feedback has also strengthened the teacher-student relationship, as students receive more personalized attention and guidance in their academic journey.

Moreover, the streamlined approach of the MATATAG Curriculum has contributed to the development of more collaborative and supportive learning environments. Teachers have reported that the reduced academic burden allows



them to create more interactive and engaging lessons, which foster a sense of community and teamwork in the classroom. This shift not only benefits student learning but also enhances the overall classroom culture, promoting mutual respect and cooperation among students and teachers. As a result, the learning environment has become more dynamic and student-centered, enabling richer educational experiences (Diano Jr, 2024).

The MATATAG Curriculum's reduction of subjects and competencies has led to meaningful improvements for both students and teachers. By easing the academic load, the curriculum allows students to engage more deeply with essential concepts and promotes long-term knowledge retention. For teachers, the changes have provided more opportunities for professional growth and improved the quality of instruction. Overall, the streamlined curriculum fosters a more supportive and effective learning environment, setting the stage for continued academic success.

21st-Century Skills and Values in the MATATAG Curriculum

The MATATAG Curriculum emphasizes 21st-century skills, particularly critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy, in response to the growing impact of technological advancements. These skills are vital for equipping students to navigate the complexities of modern life and the evolving workforce. By integrating these competencies into various subjects, the curriculum encourages students to engage in activities that promote analytical thinking, innovation, and digital fluency. Students participate in problem-solving tasks, collaborative projects, and the use of digital tools, preparing them to be adaptable and forward-thinking in a technology-driven world (DepEd, 2023).

A key aspect of the MATATAG Curriculum is its promotion of creativity. By incorporating project-based learning and open-ended tasks, the curriculum encourages students to explore different solutions and think outside traditional boundaries. This approach fosters not only creative thinking but also innovation, as students are motivated to experiment, take risks, and develop unique solutions to real-world challenges. The emphasis on creativity within the curriculum ensures that students develop the capacity to approach problems from multiple perspectives and cultivate original ideas.

Digital literacy is another critical component of the MATATAG Curriculum. As technology becomes an integral part of education and daily life, the curriculum ensures that students are proficient in using digital tools and navigating the digital world responsibly. Through the integration of technology into classroom activities, students develop skills such as information retrieval, data analysis, and the ethical use of digital platforms. These digital competencies are essential for preparing students to participate in the global digital economy and adapt to future technological developments.

In addition to 21st-century skills, the MATATAG Curriculum places a strong focus on values education, particularly through the inclusion of peace competencies. The curriculum aims to promote a peaceful and harmonious society by teaching students conflict-resolution strategies and encouraging non-violent behaviors. Through lessons that highlight empathy, respect, and social responsibility, students are guided to become compassionate individuals who contribute to the well-being of their communities. The integration of peace education aligns with the goal of fostering not only academic excellence but also character development (Goleman, 1995).

By equipping students with the skills to think critically, act creatively, and navigate the digital landscape, alongside fostering empathy and social responsibility, the curriculum ensures that learners are well-rounded individuals ready to contribute positively to society. This balanced approach creates a holistic education experience that addresses both the intellectual and emotional development of students, setting them up for future success.

Perspectives on the MATATAG Curriculum

Feedback from various stakeholders, including educators, students, and parents, has been overwhelmingly positive regarding the MATATAG Curriculum. Teachers have praised the curriculum's streamlined structure, which has allowed them to focus more on meaningful instruction rather than simply covering a wide array of topics (Diano Jr & Calbi, 2024). This reduction in workload has not only alleviated stress for educators but also enabled them to tailor their teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of their students, ultimately enhancing classroom outcomes.

Students, too, have reported positive experiences with the MATATAG Curriculum, noting that they feel less overwhelmed by the academic demands. The focus on critical thinking, problem-solving, and interactive learning has fostered greater engagement and participation in lessons. Many students expressed that the curriculum's emphasis on real-world applications and collaborative projects has made learning more relevant and enjoyable.

Parents have also expressed support for the curriculum, particularly appreciating its focus on foundational skills and the holistic development of their children. They recognize the importance of equipping students with essential competencies such as literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills to prepare them for future challenges. The incorporation of values education and peace competencies has been especially well-received, as parents see these elements as crucial for fostering responsible and empathetic future citizens (Diano Jr, 2024).

Overall, the MATATAG Curriculum has gained approval from key stakeholders, who believe it creates a more balanced and supportive learning environment. The curriculum's emphasis on foundational skills, 21st-century competencies, and holistic development is seen as a forward-thinking approach that aligns with the needs of both learners and the broader society.

Conclusion:

The MATATAG Curriculum marks a significant advancement in addressing persistent challenges within the Philippine education system. By emphasizing foundational skills, reducing academic pressure, and integrating socio-emotional learning and 21st-century competencies, it offers a more balanced and supportive framework for student growth. Early feedback has shown encouraging results, particularly in student engagement and teacher satisfaction, suggesting that the curriculum's focus on core skills and values is already fostering a positive shift in classroom dynamics.

As the implementation progresses, it will be essential to continuously assess the impact of the MATATAG Curriculum, making adjustments based on insights from educators, students, and other stakeholders. An adaptive approach will allow the curriculum to evolve in response to changing educational demands and societal needs. This ongoing evaluation will be key to ensuring that the curriculum remains effective in preparing Filipino students for success in a rapidly changing global landscape.

Further research into the long-term outcomes of the MATATAG Curriculum will be invaluable in refining its design and ensuring its sustainability. By remaining responsive to feedback and committed to continuous improvement, the Philippine education system can build a more inclusive and future-ready learning environment for all students.

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