

## IS OUR CURRICULUM TOO CROWDED? MAKING SPACE FOR MEANINGFUL LEARNING

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In many classrooms across the Philippines, teachers and students alike must deal with various hindrances to achieving and facilitating quality education. From overcrowded classrooms, outdated and lacking educational materials, and inconducive learning environments, both must also bear the weight of an overloaded curriculum. Over the years, this congested curriculum with a long list of competencies have become an added burden, and with a limited time to do so, making teaching a race against the clock. This raises an important question: is our curriculum too crowded to allow meaningful learning to take place?

A curriculum should serve as a guide for education. It serves as a map that outlines the important stops that equips the learners with knowledge and necessary skills. But when that roadmap is packed with too many stops, detours, and destinations, both learners and educators may struggle to stay focused, let alone enjoy the journey.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education's K to 12 curriculum was designed to make learning more relevant, learner-centered, and skills-based. However, recent assessments suggest that despite good intentions, the curriculum may have become too content heavy. According to a 2022 review conducted by the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II), the number of learning competencies in the basic education curriculum is excessive and leads to surface-level understanding (EDCOM II, 2022). Students are often forced to memorize facts to pass rather than gain mastery of key concepts, leaving little room for reflection or deep understanding.

When the curriculum is overcrowded, meaningful learning suffers. Students may feel overwhelmed, struggling to keep up with lessons that shift rapidly from one topic to the next. Teachers, in turn, are often forced to prioritize coverage over understanding. In a 2020 study published in the Asia Pacific Journal of Education, Filipino educators reported feeling pressured to finish the syllabus, even if it meant sacrificing additional learning opportunities or personalized instruction (Mendoza & Torralba, 2020). As a result, classroom teaching becomes more about compliance than creativity.

Moreover, a study by the Brookings Institution (Evans & Yuan, 2022) proves that this issue is not unique to the Philippines. The study emphasized that many developing countries face similar challenges: trying to teach too many topics in too little time, resulting in what researchers call the “curriculum-implementation gap.” Teachers may be expected to cover material that students are not developmentally ready for or to move on before students have fully grasped foundational skills. Instead of making connections across subjects, students are often left trying to recall fragmented information for the next quiz or test. In the long term, this kind of learning is unlikely to stick.

The Department of Education has acknowledged these challenges. In 2023, DepEd began reviewing the K to 10 curriculum to reduce the number of competencies and focus on foundational skills in literacy and numeracy. The MATATAG Curriculum, launched in pilot schools earlier this year, aims to decongest content and improve understanding by simplifying learning objectives (Department of Education, 2023). While still in early stages, this move signals a growing recognition that less may indeed be more.

Moving forward, it is important that we prioritize quality over quantity. A well-designed curriculum allows for in-depth discussion, real-world application, and student engagement. Most importantly, it should set attainable goals that are realistically timebound and serves to alleviate educational burden, not add to it. Instead of trying to teach everything, we should ask, what is most essential for students to know, and how can we help them truly understand it?

The classroom should not feel like a rush to cover everything in a limited time. By giving teachers the freedom to teach with depth—and students the time to learn meaningfully—we create a learning environment where education is not just about finishing a list but about building knowledge that lasts.

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