



A Window to the Curriculum: Elementary Social Studies Curriculum in the Zenith of a Global Pandemic

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The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The educational landscape was disturbed by the sudden spread of the COVID-19. Alterations of curriculum transaction were coming up face to face interaction with students were no longer possible so as to address the need of the students' online classes were implemented while schools are closed. The social studies curriculum as a core subject in the basic education curriculum that leads to the development of civic competence among young learners was also abridged to fit for flexible learning while sustaining its learning standards. The implementation of the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) to guide for teachers served as the emergency curriculum for the school year during the brink of the pandemic. The social studies emergency curriculum featured condensed learning competencies, flexible learning time, and personalized learning experiences. However, with learning events happening inside learners' respective homes, learned knowledge and skills in social studies are ephemeral, and the authenticity of learner's work is open for skepticism.

Keywords: Social studies curriculum; instructional design; elementary education; COVID-19.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world was surprised when the virus spread out like a wildfire that eventually became a global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a defining and enormous challenge from country to country, from the international level to local communities. On the site of news on the novel coronavirus (nCoV now called coronavirus disease), the Department of Education (DeptEd) was alarmed by the growing number of COVID-19 cases in the global arena. Hastily, the Department chalked out for precautionary measures and persistently coordinated with concerned agencies for the worst-case scenario. At the height of the ominous crisis, schools had been closed, and communities were placed under lockdown to mitigate the spread of the fatal virus [1]. The problems that were brought by the COVID-19 pandemic were unforgiving and incapacitated key institutions such as the government, the economy, and most importantly, the educational system. The overwhelming spread of the coronavirus had led to the widespread closure of public and private schools [2].

Such unforeseen academic disruption caused a significant impact among school stakeholders and compromised the time for learning. Schools around the world were unprepared and untrained to manage such public health crises [3]. As such, the primary responsibility of schools was the decision for school closure and postponed face-to-face classes for the safety of the teachers and students. This tested the school's capacity to manage the delivery of effective learning amidst the pandemic. There was a drastic change in instructional delivery, a shift to online learning modality or modular approach for learning to continue in the student's respective homes. In response, teachers recalibrated emergency remote teaching as an ephemeral solution to abate the educational impact of the global pandemic [4]. However, the problem boils down to the instructional preparedness and teaching efficacy of teachers for successful learning within the limits of the educational crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic had brought daunting shifts in the patterns of schooling. The disruption had made its expense in the educational landscape surprising school stakeholders on its effect. The United Nations [5] enlisted recommendations for schools to address the demands for learning through a safe, monitored, and inclusive policy. Educational leaders are

tasked to reimagine the school system and curriculum to adapt to the increasing demand for learning and emergency crisis. In response to the recommendations, the Department of Education initiated a plan to address educational turmoil that obstructs the transmission of learning. The Creation of a Task Force for the Management of Department of Education Response to Novel Coronavirus Acute Respiratory Disease [6] serves as a liaison for the cooperation of inter-agency task force for COVID-19 and recommend policy intervention for the reopening of schools. To imminently reach learners who lack the technological resource, the Dept Ed introduced Dept Ed Commons as a depository OER intended for teachers, parents, and students to extend learning within their convenience [7]. Extensive training was conducted to equip teachers with the technological pedagogical knowledge [8] to deliver lessons effectively through multimedia platforms (such as DeptEd Aral TV). To maximize learning, the DeptEd developed the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) as the primary reference for school leaders and curriculum developers in identifying perennial and pragmatic knowledge, skills, and values that learners must acquire, appropriateness of learning modality, and the level of responsiveness of learning materials to the local context and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic [9]. Public and private school teachers in basic education are recommended to utilize the MELCs as the basis for developing learner's module, learning activity sheets, teaching focus, and relevant instructional materials. The MELCs supplants the K-12 curriculum guide [10] as the cursory recommended curriculum amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Basically, MELCs is a condensed and comprehensive curriculum guide aligned to equipped a holistic Filipino learner with 21st-century skills. Thus, the MELCs, as prescribed by the DeptEd, serves as the emergency curriculum that will cater to the needs of learners amidst global pandemic.

Particularly in instances where social problems are more pressing (like the COVID-19 pandemic), social studies have traditionally been found to be of high importance in the basic education curriculum. The new social studies movement posits a new curriculum framework that will develop learner's problem-solving skills and provide relevance to the current social problems being faced by society [11]. Furthermore, the K-12 curriculum aims to produce active and responsible citizens in

performing their civic duties in the public sphere. Comprehensively, Thornton [12] argued that the rationale behind the offering of social studies as a school subject was due to its holistic approach in addressing real-world problems. However, the lingering marginalization of social studies had restricted its expansion in new methodologies for teaching and limited learner's experience with the subject [13]. The turmoil that the COVID-19 pandemic had hurled further in sustaining the subject's marginalization maligning what social studies can contribute to mitigating the damage posed by the pandemic.

In the K-12 curriculum guide for social studies, it is recognizable stated the ultimate purpose of social studies (Araling Panlipunan) *"to cultivate young learners with a specific identity and role as Filipinos participating in the life of society, country, and world. Simultaneously with the development of identity and civic competence is the understanding of the past and present and the relationship within society, between the relationship of society, nature, and the world, how they have changed and are changing, shaping the individual and collective future. To achieve these to this end, it is important to emphasize the interrelated competencies in Social Studies: (i) investigation; (ii) analysis and interpretation of information; (iii) research; (iv) communication, especially essay writing; and (v) compliance with ethical standards"*. The rationale explicitly described a holistic Filipino citizen geared with 21st-century skills to face the democratic society. The task of a social studies teacher is undeniably painstaking and the expectations to instill civic competence among young citizens is an uphill battle. Social studies teachers must be prepared with both content pedagogical knowledge [14] and technological pedagogical knowledge [8] to deliver a lesson effectively by grasping mastery of the content matter and technical know-how in applying educational technology to aid instruction. Additionally, fostering civic efficacy [15] through citizenship education is also carried by the social studies teachers. The task is even heavier due to the shift from conventional teaching to emergency remote teaching for the purpose of life-long learning.

Numerous literature accounts on the common approaches and methods used to deliver social studies in 21st-century classrooms. Social studies teachers are offered research-based instructional delivery that is aligned with the curriculum standards and aimed at achieving the learning

competencies such as literacy integration [16], content integration [17], issues-centered instruction [18], inquiry design model [19], and service-learning [20] to name a few. However, the implementation of the emergency curriculum gave birth to a new trend in social studies pedagogy that demands both the teacher and the parents a shared control on the transfer of learning and train the learners for responsible, independent learning. Albeit, distance education had been reinvigorated on the edge of planning for the emergency curriculum. Alternative modes of delivery that are responsive to the status of the learning community are in demand for its application. Nonetheless, the successful implementation of the emergency curriculum had become a shared responsibility of school stakeholders.

The term emergency curriculum is customarily academic jargon in the health and allied disciplines. Recently, Hodgkin [21] mentioned participatory curriculum designs in emergencies that eventually lead to a responsive perspective in curriculum development. In the words of Hodgkin *"curriculum development or revision in times of stability and peace can be fraught with sensitivities: issues of power, knowledge, and collective identity emerge in debates over what should be taught and how"* (pg.42). Ostensibly, Hodgkin's design was framed based on the global crisis faced by the educational system globally, such as civil unrest, natural disasters, and economic downturns where a health pandemic is unforeseen. Nevertheless, the underlying principles are suited to the educational landscape that we are in brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hodgkin [21] argues that understanding the complex relationship of knowledge-power structures is essential in designing a responsive and effective curriculum in times of emergency. Educational leaders, teachers, parents, and students must actively shape the curriculum that will be implemented temporarily. As a humanitarian response, the emergency curriculum must be designed to select developmentally, culturally, and essential competencies necessary for the learner's survival without compromising the learning capability and well-being of the learners. There must be careful planning and analysis of the situation before implementing an impromptu curriculum and policy.

Generally, the DeptEd produced learning modules that are based on the MELCs for public school teachers to distribute, retrieve, and

record. Specifically, the learning modules for social studies are aligned with the MELCs intention to develop civic competence based on the grade-level standards. From facilitators to tutors, social studies teachers are constraint from adapting interactive and collaborative learning experiences rather conduct a home visitation to perform a short session of tutorials. This worries the academic community on the quality of students that schools are producing. Social studies invite the learners to explore their political and social world through community involvement and civic participation [22]. In an emergency remote learning, learners are shackled in their homes, the opportunity for participative citizenship education is jeopardized. Hence, this exploration will decipher the status of the elementary social studies curriculum and its implementation in the emergency curriculum through the lens of teachers and instructional materials.

2. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

This exploration will utilize a multiple case study design where the units of analysis [23] are the social studies curriculum under MELCs for elementary and secondary, as well as teachers per year level. The primary source of data for this research will be MELCs for Social Studies in the elementary and secondary levels. A thorough analysis and evaluation of the curriculum guide will be performed to construct meaning and relevance to the study. Also, a copy of modules will be reviewed for its alignment to the curriculum and structure of teaching-learning components. A semi-structured interview [24] session will be conducted to the teachers per grade level on the taught curriculum to supplement the data mined from the written curriculum. The study is aimed to collect exhaustive data on the status of the social studies curriculum in the elementary and secondary level in the emergency curriculum through the implementation of the Most Essential Learning Competency (MELCs) of the Department of Education (DeptEd). Primarily, the evident source of data will be the Social Studies MELCs curriculum, supplemented by interview sessions from elementary teachers (Grade 1 to 6). Thus, there should be at least one participant that will be interviewed for the following grade levels: For the elementary level (Grade 1, Grade 2, Grade 3, Grade 4, Grade 5, and Grade 6). However, the researcher will encourage more participants to be involved in the study for the research reliability, validity, and trustworthiness.

The extracted data from the documents (curriculum guide and sample module) will be treated through systematic content analysis [25], while the data collected from the in-depth interview will be analyzed through thematic analysis [26]. The aggregation of common thoughts from the transcripts will be presented through themes and will be explained by supporting theories and literature.

2.1 Most Essential Learning Competencies

To recognize resilience education as one of the SDGs, the Department of Education implemented an emergency curriculum to be implemented for the S.Y. 2020-2021 among public and private schools in the entire Philippines. The MELCs served as the primary tool for curriculum implementers in identifying and implementing learning delivery approaches that are suited to the local context and diversity of learners while adapting to the challenges posed by COVID-19 (DeptEd, 2020). Teachers are recommended to refer to the MELCs as reference material in selecting flexible learning modalities, learning experiences, and curriculum support materials to be used in their remote classes. As a recommended curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic, the MELCs is a curriculum guide having a list of most essential learning competencies for all of the core subjects in basic education. In other words, the MELCs supersede but does not diminish the established K-12 curriculum guide (2016) based on the Policy Guidelines on the Implementation of K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum. The MELCs were designed for teachers to contextualize and localize the learning competency based on the accessible learning materials and learners' needs. Likewise, the MELCs were presented to school stakeholders to capacitate teachers with content-pedagogical knowledge for remote teaching and develop instructional materials such as learning activity sheets, self-learning modules, and video lessons that are susceptible to the altering educational landscape.

2.1.1 Identifying the most essential learning competencies in elementary social studies

With the commitment to ensure quality learning despite the global health crisis, the Department of Education initiated curriculum reforms and resilient policies that will recognize the learners' social, economic, political, and health challenges. To be able to identify the most essential learning

outcomes that are fit for the learners' capability and be able to carry out given the limited learning opportunities, curriculum experts are compelled to examine the current curriculum, determine the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be mastered, reflect on the ethos of education in the current setting, recognize the available school resources, apply macro and micro level of analysis on the recommended curriculum, and identify feasible learning expectations. Rigorous planning and cooperation among stakeholders were crucial in producing a resilient and inclusive curriculum. Nonetheless, the DeptEd utilized a comprehensive criterion to be utilized in curriculum review. In fact, the descriptor for identifying the MELCs per subject and grade level was perennialism. Moiser (1951) described a perennialism as an educational theory grounded on the dogmas of realism. This theory explicates the emphasis of fundamental skills, enduring truths and values, and the great ideas of the Western world. By implication, a learning competency is deemed perennial or enduring (as the word used by DeptEd) if it is sustained beyond schooling and applicable in the real world.

After a methodical review and straining the learning competencies, the next step was to categorize whether it requires to be retained, merged, dropped, or rephrased. The learning competency will be retained if it is a pre-requisite for the next grade level and passes the endurance criterion. It will be merged or clustered if the set of learning competencies has a parallel learning purpose, intention, and expectations. It will be rephrased to become comprehensive. Finally, it will be removed or dropped if it is recurring, narrow, can be introduced in the earlier or later quarter or grade level, and superseded by another learning competency (DetpEd, 2020).

The themes of the social studies curriculum, core learning areas per grade level, content and performance standards, time allotment, and subject description are sustained based on the prescribed curriculum. The implementation of MELCs are vouched to be contextualized so as to support the existing diversity among learners, teachers, learning environment, sociocultural background, preferences, beliefs, and exceptionality.

2.2 Time Allotment

Having a similar nature to the curriculum guide, the MELCs is an organized blueprint designed to

guide teachers in allocating learning experiences grounded on the learning competencies assigned per week. The MELCs cover the number of school days based on the prescribed academic calendar. Having this in mind, the learning activity sheets or self-learning modules were purposefully designed to accustom a learning competency that must be achieved within a week and sustain the learner's appetite for learning.

Learners are expected to achieve and retain the learning competencies assigned to each self-learning module as an indicator of learning. Each learning competency has a set time frame for teachers to deliver and students to perform. The intended learning competency for each quarter varies in number and relevance based on the scope of the topic, learner's capability, and curriculum goals. The time allotment for each subject remains the same (e.g., Social studies has 40 minutes' time allotment daily) and must be reflected on a budget of time allotted by the learners to execute and create the expected learning outcomes. However, the events of learning in the learner's home space made flexible learning possible where monitoring and validating of study time allotment is unviable. This further escalates the marginalization of social studies in terms of time consumed for the teaching of its concepts due to uncontrollable management of time for studying social studies [27]. Parents or other elderly relatives of the learner partake in the responsibility of becoming an immediate tutor of the learners. The learner's tutor schedules and decide the learning tasks to be prioritized and activities for guided and independent practice. This undermines the position of social studies as part of the recommended curriculum and timeliness of instilling civic values and attitudes in times of health crisis. Despite of the intricate task management and time allotment, elementary social studies teachers asserted that learners are able to accomplish the assigned learning experiences in their social studies self-learning modules than those of Mathematics, Science, and English.

2.3 Curriculum Scope and Sequence

The Elementary Social Studies curriculum is aimed in instilling citizenship consciousness and civic engagement among young members of the community, Framed based on the expanding communities model (Hanna, 1965), traditional chronological approach [28], core knowledge (Hirsch,1987), and spiral progression approach

[29], the curriculum is designed to accommodate primary learners (K to 6) in developing civic competence by exploring the democratic society and independent world (NCSS, 1994). As the starting point of instruction, learners are considered to be at the center of the community, as the learners grow and develop, their social sphere expands and networks builds. From exploring and understanding the social self to the family, school, community, state/region, state, nation and global community [30]. The expansion of social sphere is articulated to be logical (inner to outward) and the study of its layers is prescribed to be all-encompassing [31].

At an early stage, the social studies are incorporated in the pre-school core curriculum with a focus on understanding the self and building relationship in the neighborhood as a foundation in cultivating community awareness. As the learners reach Grade 6, by realizing their place in the community and civic responsibility, they are prepared to face the challenges in becoming a responsible Filipino citizen.

2.4 Instructional Methods

Supposedly the instructional procedure in the taught curriculum for social studies follows content integration, conceptual or thematic teaching, inquiry method, service learning, and problem solving to name a few. The prescribe curriculum sets the bar for the teachers to deliver the lesson as stipulated and for the learners to attain and excel through the achievement of the the content and performance standard. However, the facilitation of the transfer of learning, cultivation of deep learning, refinement of skills, nurturing learner's potential, and the execution of the lesson are entrust to teachers. The closing of schools clearly influenced the teacher's pedagogical approach in reaching isolated and distant learners, as well as the need for learning to continue. There were several innovative teaching methods that was adapted by elementary teachers in achieving civic competence among K-6 learners.

2.5 Content Integration

The absolute priority of the state among STEM subjects had led to the subordination of Social Studies teaching in the basic education curriculum. Primary grades teachers openly expressed their thoughts in prioritizing in developing basic literacy (Reading, Writing, Arithmetic) among toddlers by spending the time

allotted for learning social studies. Furthermore, teachers indicated that learners find it uncomplicated when learning social studies, thus, teachers initiate in dedicating the time for reading remediation and reinforcement. Such arbitrary decision undermines learner's curiosity in discovering the outside world and limits learning opportunities in developing civic competence.

However, intermediate grades teacher underscores the importance of learning social studies and developing basic literacy amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, content integration suits the calling. In fact, contemporary elementary social studies curriculum is designed based on the framework of interdisciplinary or integration. Several curriculum experts contributed significant areas where social studies fit for concept integration such as literature [32], multicultural education [33], controversial issues [34], and literacy[35]. The MELCs and self-learning modules illustrate fusion continuum model, where two or more subjects, concepts, and/or skills are combined to produce a meaningful curriculum (Parker, 2005). Since the learning competencies had been deduced and reconfigured, some learning competencies had been combined if it's too specific, recurring, and develops the same skills. This method addresses the concern of social studies marginalization and time allocation. As an integrated subject, learners will be able to expand their knowledge into different discipline and harnessing their skills while learning social studies in-breadth and comprehensively. Most of the learning experiences in the self-learning modules, asks for learners to develop skills in reading comprehension, deepening civic thinking, and increase knowledge in citizenship education that are valuable for civic engagement and useful in understanding other disciplines.

2.6 Independent Learning

Learning in the emergency curriculum transformed learners into becoming independent and responsible learners. Independent learning [36] or self-regulated learning [37] is a student-centered learning approach where the enabling environment, teacher, student, and ICT interplays for personalization of the learning process. In this approach, learners plan for the sequence of learning tasks, monitor their level of learning, develop self-assessment, builds confidence, and are held accountable for learning to exist. Self-regulated learning

Table 1. Comparison tally of learning outcomes in the MELCs (emergency curriculum) and curriculum guide (official curriculum)

Grade Level	Quarter	MELCS Most Essential Learning Outcomes Guide (Emergency Curriculum)	CG Curriculum Guide (Official Curriculum)
1	I	7	14
	II	7	23
	III	5	23
	IV	8	14
	Total	27	74
2	I	8	9
	II	7	12
	III	8	8
	IV	4	6
	Total	27	35
3	I	10	14
	II	8	8
	III	8	11
	IV	5	16
	Total	31	49
4	I	7	13
	II	5	12
	III	5	9
	IV	5	8
	Total	22	42
5	I	8	13
	II	3	9
	III	5	7
	IV	4	8
	Total	20	37
6	I	7	11
	II	7	9
	III	3	7
	IV	8	8
	Total	25	35

Table 2. Social studies grade level content sequence based on the official curriculum guide.

Grade Level	Content Sequence
K	Me and my neighbor
1	Me and my Parents and School
2	My Community from now and then
3	The Provinces and My Region
4	My Country
5	The Birth of the Philippines as a Nation
6	Challenges and Responses towards Nationality

becomes successful when learners are presented with an organized learning task, where the process becomes uninterrupted and consistent with the learning expectations. Furthermore, clarity and detailed instruction provide a better image of what to do in the learning task. Pintrich [38] identified the key elements for a successful implementation of independent learning (planning, monitoring, controlling, and evaluation). In contrast, Zimmerman [37] stresses that Pintrich ignored the influence of learner's motivation for learning.

MELCs are implemented through the teacher's effort in producing LAS and self-learning modules to be distributed individually among learners. The components of these learning materials are designed to develop self-directed learners and opportunities for teachers to construct differentiated instruction. However, despite having an inclusive characteristic, teachers fail to develop LAS and self-learning modules that cater to learners diversity. For the DetpEd recommends a validated module to be reproduced and distributed by teachers, discounting the principles of contextualization and localization. Addressing the problem on disadvantaged learners are only addressed through home visitation, constant communication with their parents, and tutorial from more knowledgeable others. Applying self-regulated learning in social studies is deemed beneficial to learners, especially in developing and applying disciplinary skills such as learner's self-efficacy in participating within a democratic society [39], increasing political efficacy [40], engaging in historical thinking and reasoning [41]. The role of a social studies teacher is to model effective self-regulatory processes and guide learners in producing their personalized learning strategy. There is also a significant influence of self-regulated learning in the achievement of middle grades students in social studies [42].

2.7 Assessing Learners

As an integral part of effective instruction, assessment in elementary social studies is executed to improve the quality of instruction. Assessing learners in the emergency curriculum is a struggle for teachers and vulnerable to skepticism. The assessment that demands full attention in this contingent is classroom-based assessment. In elementary social studies, assessing learning outcomes is a herculean task. For it challenges social studies teachers on the selection on the type of assessment tool

(selected-response or constructed-response items and performance or authentic assessment), the knowledge, skills, and values to measure (cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domain), and the chief purpose of assessing [43, 44, 45]. In history education, the value of learning history is contingent upon the development of historical knowledge (HK), historical thinking (HT), and historical consciousness (HC) (Shemith, 2020). Geography education stresses the learner's ability for geographic understanding and spatial thinking as essential skills for geographic literacy [46]. In contrast, assessment in citizenship education deals with the level of learner's engagement in a democratic society. However, the design of assessment tools that coincides with the curriculum standards and discipline priority areas are bound on the "how" and "what" to assess by the social studies teacher.

In the self-learning modules, the assessment tasks are embedded in the last part of the module and framed by teachers grounded on the outlined MELCs in every topic. Learners are given adequate time to perform and answer the modules in their respective homes and to be returned during the set deadline. Parents supervise their children in answering their modules while continuously coordinating with the teacher. Most of the assessment tasks are intended to challenge learner's lower thinking skills and restricted-response tests. Seefeldt, Castle, and Falconer [47] abate the adaptation of conventional paper-pencil tests in primary social studies. The adaption of an authentic form of assessment stimulates the connection between the learned concepts with the learner's direct and real experiences. Furthermore, in a highly flexible learning modality, where the assessment task is performed under an uncontrolled learning environment, its score and authenticity are open for skepticism and devaluation (Shemith, 2020).

3. CONCLUSION

The surging waves of challenges that shatters the educational system had evidently articulated how schools are caught off guard. The development and implementation of an emergency curriculum should not be limited to times of global catastrophe; instead, it should serve as a model for introducing and normalizing flexible learning. As we embark on Education 4.0, flexible learning must be the new normal in delivering modalities. Nevertheless, the curriculum framework in social studies requires

overhaul and review to address varying learning complexities. In this time of crisis, where citizens are discordant, government policies are criticized, and devaluation of social justice. A sound and meaningful social studies curriculum become paramount.

DISCLAIMER

The products used for this research are commonly and predominantly use products in our area of research and country. There is absolutely no conflict of interest between the authors and producers of the products because we do not intend to use these products as an avenue for any litigation but for the advancement of knowledge. Also, the research was not funded by the producing company rather it was funded by personal efforts of the authors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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