

Perceptions of Select Filipino Teachers on the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) of the K to 12 Curriculum

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Abstract

The effects of Covid-19 on schools have been substantial and widespread. The impact of these changes has been far-reaching, affecting students and teachers alike. Strategically, the Department of Education in the Philippines released a concise version of the K to 12 curriculum to include only the Most Essential Learning Competencies or the MELCs. In effect, the researcher determined the perception of the teachers on the MELCs. Through a survey of 173 teachers across the Country, the findings revealed that teachers moderately agreed on statements related to impression ($M=2.71$, $SD=0.44$), morale ($M=2.60$, $SD=0.36$), stress, and workload ($M=2.63$, $SD=0.35$). Lastly, there was no significant difference in the perception of teachers as to gender, gender, years of teaching experience, type of school, and academic backgrounds.

Keywords: Teacher perception, K to 12, MELCs, COVID pandemic, Curriculum

Introduction

Only recently, the Philippines significantly changed its education system through the K to 12 curriculum reform. The curricular change was initiated to address the different local and international challenges confronting the educational preparation of the students. Ultimately, the curricular reform in the country is to afford Filipino learners the skills and knowledge they need for the 21st century.

However, even if it has not reached a decade yet, the implementation of the K to 12 curricula is confronted with another challenge—the COVID-19 health crisis. The pandemic necessitated another modification to ensure the continuity of learning even with the closure of schools. Strategically, the Department of Education (DepEd) made a drastic move to modify the curriculum to teach only the most essential. Through the Most Essential Learning Competencies or MELCs, the DepEd envisioned that remote learning modalities cover the basic and necessary learning goals (Department of Education, 2022).

The implementation of MELCs is unique to the country. Among the literature reviewed in the study, more study is needed to describe the initiative of other countries, in terms of curriculum, to address the educational dilemma caused by the pandemic. The modification of the K to 12 Curriculum to MELCs interested the researcher as such a program can affect the learning process in basic education schools. The study results inform the DepEd and other stakeholders if the MELCs can be an alternative curriculum implemented during challenging times like the pandemic or even effective in the post-Covid period.

Consequently, the study attempts to describe the implementation of the MELCs through the lens of one of the key players in the teaching-learning process--the teachers. Several researchers have pointed out (Dymond et al., 2015; Janko & Peskova, 2017) how teachers see or view the curriculum is essential. As implementors of the curriculum, teachers can provide meaningful feedback on the effectiveness and challenges of the program. They are valuable sources of information as they have first-hand experiences with how the curriculum works in the classroom.

Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions are asked:

1. What are teachers' levels of agreement on perception statements (impression, morale, and stress and workload) related to the MELCs released by the Department of Education?
2. Do teacher perceptions differ regarding gender, years of teaching experience, type of school, and academic background?

Review of related literature

Curriculum and curricular change in the Philippine context

With the many definitions of curriculum, the present research adapts that it is a product of an interplay of different factors (e.g., learning standards, learning objectives, and assessment) that are aimed at educating a student. Brubaker (2011) described the curriculum as "what persons experience in a setting ."Therefore, the curriculum is what happens in the classroom, what the child learns at the end of the day, and what the teachers assess.

Contextually, the curricular reform to K to 12 in the Philippines had several drivers. However, it is ultimately a country's response to the global issues that confront its graduates, such as academic parallelism, skills competence, and citizen mobility (Montebon, 2014). Hence, the novel features of the K to 12 curriculum include extended basic education years by adding the Kinder and senior high school years. It also strategized to decongest the competencies in all disciplines. Mother tongue instruction at the primary level is also implemented. Lastly, the contextualization of lessons and arranging of the competencies in the spiral progression are observed. According to Hernandez (2012), Bro. Armin Luistro, then DepEd Secretary, stressed that the K to 12 programs would provide better access to education and improve the quality offered. The K to 12 assures that every Filipino student would have equal footing with other nationalities because the additional years of schooling will equip students with more knowledge and skills.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic confronted the implementation of the K to 12 programs in the country. The Department of Education modified the curriculum to include only the most essential learning competencies. According to the guidelines released by the Department of Education, the MELCs are to ensure the learning continuity of about 27 million Filipino learners during the pandemic. The release of MELCs is also an effort of the Department of Education to address the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which is to build resilient education systems.

Teachers and curriculum reform

An effective curriculum has not remained stagnant but one that has effectively developed through time. The constantly changing societal needs necessitate curriculum change or reform (Gouédard et al., 2020). In effect, curricular reforms must equip students with skills and competencies to adapt to social circumstances.

However, the role of teachers in implementing the curriculum is crucial (Gouëdard et al., 2020; Miller & Seller, 1985; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Kisa & Correnti, 2015). Teachers are responsible for connecting the curriculum's different spectrums, the school goals, and stakeholders (Miller & Seller, 1985). Operationally, Gouëdard et al. (2020) stressed that teachers' efficacy, practices, and perceptions help in the effective implementation of the curriculum. Hargreaves & Fullan (2012) agree that teachers understand how a curriculum can work and affect their students. On the other hand, Kisa & Correnti (2015) corroborate that teachers need to gain knowledge and beliefs to ensure the smooth implementation of a curriculum. Indeed, teachers can affect curricular processes.

The cited influences of teachers on curriculum reform stem from their perception of the curriculum as influenced by their context and experience. Perception, as described by (Murphy & Torff, 2014) author is a highly active process of meaning-making as an end-product of one's interaction with their environment. The construct is primarily influenced by their identity and interpretative framework that directs their likelihood or reason to go against or for the curricular reform (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011).

Primarily, teacher perception of the curriculum is shaped by their school experience. Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto (2011) pointed out that teachers are influenced by the school system, particularly in how they have experienced the efforts of the institution to achieve the curricular goals, the quality of curriculum management, and the amount of support they receive. In relation, Kamokman (2019) stressed that teachers are a useful source of feedback to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum.

On the other hand, Janko and Peskova (2017) added that personal factors influence teachers' perceptions of the curriculum. For instance, more senior teachers may view curriculum change differently from teachers who just graduated from the university (Dymond et al., 2015). Even gender affects the teaching styles of teachers. According to El-Emadi et al. (2019), male teachers are more cognitive and skillful, while female teachers are nurturing. Such gender perception of teachers can influence student interest and success in school.

Regardless of the reason, Lacerda & Sepel (2019) advanced that teachers should perceive curriculum reform as "valid, positive, and executable ."Understanding teachers' perceptions of the curriculum create pathways and opportunities for successful implementation. To do so, Nevenglosky et al. (2019) suggested addressing factors that teachers perceived to be problematic in a curriculum. Such actions promote a culture of curriculum fidelity that will encourage teachers to implement the curriculum judiciously.

Methodology

This research used a quantitative research design using a survey method. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the study.

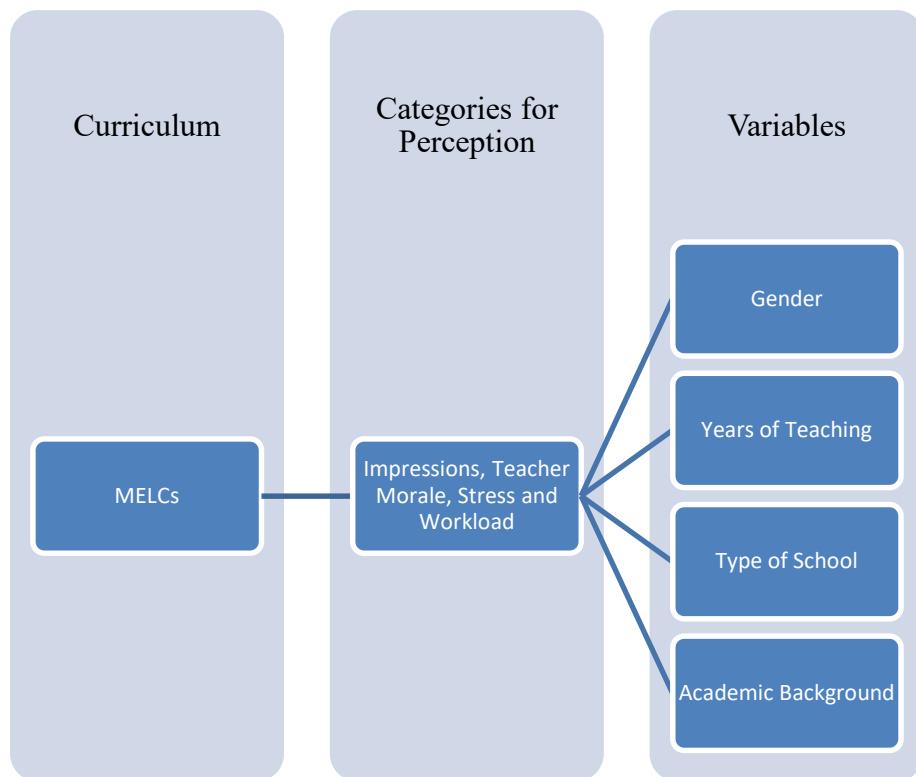


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Teachers' Perception on MELCs

Several researchers posit that teachers' perception of the curriculum underpins the effective implementation of the curriculum (Porter et al., 2015; Nadelson et al., 2012). How teachers view or perceive curriculum change can impact its successful translation in the classroom.

The current study is influenced by the research of Kessler-Hopek (2019), who investigated teacher perception of curriculum change in Georgia. One of the results of her study revealed three areas of teacher perception of curriculum: impression, teacher morale, and stress and workload. The said areas were adapted since the constructs represent the areas of teacher perception of a curriculum. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study.

From Kessler-Hopek's (2019) study, teacher impressions describe the general characteristics of the curriculum change or standard implemented. Hicks (2020) corroborates how teachers' impressions and buy-in can influence the learning experience delivered in the classroom using the implemented standards. That said, the researcher deems that teacher impression on the MELCs can be an essential category to investigate in the study.

Another construct related to teacher perception of the curriculum is teacher morale. According to Kessler-Hopek (2019), teacher morale considers the decisions or voices of teachers in curriculum development and implementation. Teacher morale also describes the

ability to perform their task professionally. Teachers must feel valued and heard as classroom experts and critical role players in the curriculum. The expert opinions of teachers can inform curricular implementors on areas to improve in the program.

The last construct related to teacher perception is stress and workload. Kessler-Hopek (2019) describe that stress and workload is an internal feeling of teachers towards their task. External factors can influence such internal feelings. In the case of teachers, external change, such as transitioning to the new curriculum standards, may influence their stress levels. Kessler-Hopek (2019) cautioned that teachers' stress levels should be considered, for it can directly influence their motivation and, in effect, may be manifested in their performance.

On another note, the study also explores teachers' perceptions of the curriculum according to certain variables. Fundamentally, how the curriculum is translated in the classroom can vary as schools are of different contexts. In the study, the researcher investigated if teacher perception of MELCs differs as to their gender, the nature of the school, and their years of teaching experience.

The first factor investigated is if gender influence teacher perception of the curriculum. According to Sari (2016), teachers have an innate perception of the classroom process as influenced by their gender. Sari & Başarır (2016) found out that the traditional gender roles translate into the professional dispositions of the teachers. With the findings of Sari & Başarır (2016) the researcher is interested in determining if gender affects teachers' perception of the MELCs.

Second, the years of teaching experience are also hypothesized to influence teachers' perception of the MELCs. As teachers mature, they can discern how and why a curriculum can work. Konokman et al. (2017) stressed that a teacher's expertise through time could input ways to implement the curriculum effectively. Therefore, this study investigates whether such an idea holds in the context of teachers delivering the MELCs.

Third, the nature of the school is investigated since public school settings differ from privately-owned institutions. Such differences may involve flexibility of implementation and instructional support. Thus, the nature of schools can provide different experiences for teachers that may lead to their perception of the MELCs.

Lastly, teachers' academic background is also investigated to determine if it affects teacher perception of the curriculum. Kessler-Hopek (2019) identified that professional development affects teachers' perception of the curriculum. Consequently, academic background as an identifier of professional development is hypothesized to affect how teachers perceive the MELCs of the K to 12 curriculum in the country.

As shown in Figure 2, the study mainly identifies the perception of teachers on the MELCs as to how it affects their teacher morale, their impressions on the curriculum, the stress they encounter, and even the amount of workload they experience. As teachers work in a different context, the study also explores if teacher perception significantly varies according to the nature of their school, specialization, years of teaching experience, and gender.

Participants and Sampling

Teachers who experienced teaching the MELCs were identified to participate in the study. Through a purposive snowball sampling method, about 255 teachers attempted to participate in the study. However, upon the return of the survey results, only 173 participants finished the survey. The demographics of the teacher participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographical Distribution of Participants

	Criteria	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	47	27.17
	Female	126	72.83
Years of Teaching Experience	0 to 5 yrs	47	27.20
	6 to 10 yrs	34	19.70
	11 to 15 yrs	31	17.90
	16 to 20 yrs	23	13.30
	more than 20 yrs	38	22.00
Type of School	Private	16	9.20
	Public	152	87.90
	Others	5	2.90
Academic Backgrounds	Bachelors	93	53.80
	Masters	66	38.20
	Doctorate	13	7.50
	Post-Doctorate	1	0.60

*N=173

Instrumentation

The survey instrument has been modified from the study of Kessler-Hopek (2019) on teacher perception of the curriculum. The teacher perception instrument has twenty-two statements clustered into teacher impression (7 statements), moral (8 statements), and stress and workload (7 statements) categories. Each statement allowed respondents to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale with five as strongly agree, four as agree, three as neutral, two as disagree, and one as strongly disagrees.

Slight modifications were made to the instrument. Thus, the instrument was subjected to phase validity among curriculum experts. The validator found the instrument valid with minimal suggestions on grammar and form. Upon subjecting the data to a reliability test, the reported Cronbach alpha is greater than 0.5 for all categories of the questionnaire (Impression=0.795; Moral=0.720; Stress and workload=0.712). Hence, the questionnaire is deemed reliable.

Data Gathering Procedures

The validated research instrument was converted into an online survey form using the Qualtrics application. The survey form stipulated ethical statements on the study's conduct and emphasized the respondents' voluntary participation. A link on the survey was sent to the different group messaging systems of a social media platform, while others received the invitation through email. The online survey happened on November 2021 to December 2022.

Data Analysis

Primarily, the data gathered from Qualtrics was analyzed to determine the completeness of the responses. Incomplete responses were excluded, and those that signified involuntary participation were deleted. Meanwhile, negative statements were recoded to make the whole perspective of the responses aligned and parallel.

The data was then interpreted using a descriptive statistic, particularly the mean. To analyze the level of agreement of the respondents on the statements asked in the survey, the researcher used the following ranges:

Interpretation Guide		
Range	General Survey	Sub-category on Stress and Workload
4.51 to 5.00	Very high agreement	Significantly increased
3.50 to 4.50	High agreement	Somewhat increased
2.51 to 3.50	Moderate agreement	Remained the same
1.51 to 2.50	Low agreement	Somewhat decrease
1.00 to 1.50	Very low agreement	Significantly decreased

The researcher used correlational statistics to compare teacher perceptions of the variables identified. First, the researcher used an independent sample T-test to determine if there is a significant difference between the perception of male and female teachers on MELCs. Next, the researcher used one-way ANOVA to determine if there is a significant difference in teacher perception of MELCs according to their years of teaching, type of school, and academic background.

Results

Teacher Perception on MELCs

Primarily, this study aims to describe the perceptions of teachers on the released MELCS by the DepEd in the Philippines. Table 2 below reports the results of the online survey that was conducted.

Table 2 Teacher Perception on MELCs

Categories of Teacher Perceptions	Average Mean	SD	Interpretation
Impressions	2.71	0.44	Moderate
Teacher Morale	2.60	0.36	Moderate
Stress and Workload	2.63	0.35	Moderate

As seen in Table 2, the perception of teachers on the MELCs for the three categories are generally in moderate agreement but with very few low agreements too. Based on the average mean, the impression had the highest level of agreement among the three categories, while teacher morale had the lowest.

For impressions on MELCs, the teachers moderately agreed that there is a difference between the old and the new curriculum ($M=3.02$, $SD=0.83$). They also moderately agreed that the MELCs could promote collaboration in preparing resources ($M=2.95$, $SD=0.69$). The MELCs is easier to understand ($M=2.73$, $SD=0.79$) and it will promote student success ($M=2.71$, $SD=0.82$). Lastly, the teachers moderately agreed that the MELCs make them feel more prepared to create a new curriculum ($M=2.59$, $SD=0.79$). Meanwhile, the teachers have a low agreement that the MELCs are more rigorous than the previous curriculum ($M=2.55$, $SD=0.83$) and that it will have little impact on their everyday practice ($M=2.49$, $SD=1.04$).

On teacher morale, the respondents moderately agreed that they are more informed on the contents of the curriculum ($M=3.02$, $SD=0.79$), that it will help them become effective teachers ($M=2.87$, $SD=0.75$), and that it will help them prepare students for college after graduation ($M=2.86$, $SD=0.85$). Concurrently, the teachers also moderately agreed on negative statements on MELCs, such as focusing their efforts on complying with the mandates of the new curriculum ($M=2.93$, $SD=0.85$) and considering their decisions in its implementation ($M=2.79$, $SD=0.74$). The teachers had low agreement on morale statements describing that the MELCs will restrict their creativity ($M=2.45$, $SD=0.99$) and that their voices will be heard in developing policies to regulate curriculum implementation ($M=2.36$, $SD=0.95$).

Lastly, teachers moderately agreed on statements describing their stress and workload due to implementing MELCs. The statement with the highest level of agreement describes that teachers' efforts in implementing the MELCs will be worthwhile ($M=3.01$, $SD=0.67$). Also, teachers moderately agreed that the MELCs will require substantial revision of materials ($M=2.89$, $SD=0.75$), that they will spend more time on the new curriculum and that it will allow them to focus more on teaching higher-order thinking skills ($M=2.94$, $SD=0.79$). In terms of preparedness, the teachers moderately agreed that they were sufficiently prepared to teach the MELCs due to the professional development programs conducted for them ($M=2.58$, $SD=0.85$). Notably, the teachers disagreed on the time it would take them to prepare students for testing ($M=2.50$, $SD=0.92$).

The teachers were also asked to rate the change they experienced in terms of stress, workload, and productivity regarding implementing the MELCs. The mean scores gathered revealed that teachers generally perceived that their stress level ($M=2.67$; $SD=0.95$), workload ($M=2.75$; $SD=0.88$), and productivity ($M=2.65$; $SD=0.867$) remained the same in the MELCs compared with the expanded K to 12 curricula.

Another study objective is to determine if teacher perceptions vary according to certain variables. Tables 3 to 4 summarize the results of the correlation tests conducted for each variable.

Table 3 T-test for Gender and Teacher Perception

Categories	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Stress and Workload	Male	47	2.5684	.43422	-1.403	3.752	.054
Impression	Female	126	2.6529	.31672			
Teacher Morale	Male	47	2.7264	.52178	.369	1.275	.260
Morale	Female	126	2.6984	.41175			
Teacher	Male	47	2.5399	.41138	-1.256	2.712	.101
	Female	126	2.6171	.33828			

Based on table 3, it can be inferred that the perception of teachers does not significantly differ according to gender ($Sig > 0.5$). It implies that the perceptions of male and female teachers are similar.

Table 4 ANOVA Test for years of teaching

Variables and Categories	Impression		Teacher Morale		Stress and Workload	
	Ave. Mean= 2.71		Ave. Mean= 2.60		Ave. Mean= 2.63	
	F	Sig.	F	Sig.	F	Sig.
Years of Teaching	1.30	.273	.538	.708	.151	.962
Type of School	.684	.506	.827	.439	2.167	.118
Academic Background	.953	.417	.172	.915	.758	.519

*N=173

As seen in Table 4, The ANOVA test conducted revealed that the perception of teachers does not significantly vary (all have $S > 0.5$) according to the number of years of teaching, the type of school where teachers come from, and their academic background. It shows that teachers' perception of the MELCs is not affected by years of teaching experience, their context, or even their professional preparations.

Discussions

The study's limitation primarily lies in the number of participants involved in the survey. With such a number, the discussion presented is still subject to confirmation with a more significant survey population. Nevertheless, the researcher posits that the results can shed light on understanding how teachers perceive the released Most Essential Learning Competencies of the Department of Education in the country.

According to Murphy and Torff (2014), perception is awareness of information with one's senses. Perception mainly results from one's experience. In this study, teacher perception of the MELCs of the K to 12 programs was investigated to infer the program's effectiveness.

A notable result of the study primarily involves the moderate perception of teachers on most of the categories asked. In the instrument used, the moderate levels of agreement describe

that teachers do not necessarily agree or disagree with the statements asked of them. Teacher responses are generally at midpoint value. According to Chyung et al. (2017), a mid-point allows respondents to give answers in both the direction and strength of their opinion about a topic. Chyung et al. (2017) further explained that midpoint answers might be due to the respondents' knowledge of the topic, their level of engagement in the study, and even other factors they could consider while answering the survey.

In the case of the present research, the MELCs, as a relatively new standard, have been implemented for over a year. Hence, its maturity influenced teachers' perceptions of the program. The present study's result is similar to Cochrane & Cuevas (2015), who investigated curriculum change in the state of Georgia. They described that the early implementation of the standards affects teacher perception. In effect, the researcher suggests that a similar study can be conducted considering the maturity of the curriculum. Nevertheless, the results of this study offer several insights into the MELCs of the K to 12 curriculum in the Philippines.

As to Chyung et al. (2017), a midpoint answer allows the researchers to infer and present results in both directions of the scale. With the results mostly on a moderate level of agreement or at the midpoint, the researcher deems it wise to infer the discussion based on the ranks of the mean values of the perception statements. The researcher also looked for statements that support each other and yield similar observations.

For teacher impression, the results of the study describe that teachers are not entirely unaware of the features of the MELCs. Actually, the statement on the awareness of the curriculum yielded the highest level of agreement on the impression category. The teachers realized that the MELCs and the K to 12 have no difference. The said observation is supported by the high mean ratings in teacher morale on their level of information on t. Moreover, the teachers' familiarity with the MELCs seemed supported by the low level of perception regarding the rigor of the MELCs and their impact on their everyday practice. That said, teachers seemed confident with the MELCs and their standards. Their familiarity with the content of the MELCs may promote the ease of executing the standards in their classes. Their level of awareness of the MELCs is a promising potential to implement the standard in the classroom effectively. Hicks (2020) stressed that teachers' buy-in of the curriculum affects the teaching-learning process, while McKeown et al. (2019) describe that positive perception of teachers will ensure the development of programs that will effectively deliver the standards. With such perceived familiarity, teachers' moderate perception of the statements on morale supports their confidence to deliver the MELCs in their classes professionally. To some extent, such perceived confidence in teachers can be viewed positively.

The teachers also gave a relatively high mean rating regarding their perception of how to conduct their profession. Ultimately, in the teaching morale, it can be observed that teachers perceive they can be more effective teachers in the MELCs. Their familiarity with the study may support it. Compared to others, statements describing the morale of teachers towards MELCs are relatively higher. With the MELCs, they can promote effective student learning and focus on developing their critical and creative thinking skills. In the study conducted by Richter et al., (2021), they stressed that teachers' perception of their professional identity is affected on how they view their work efficacy. Consequently, the relatively high morale of the teachers towards MELCs boosted their confidence as professional teachers.

Another cluster of responses that yield similar mean ratings is the amount of work teachers will exert for the MELCs. In the stress and workload category, teachers acknowledge that the MELCS will require substantial development of lesson plans and instructional materials. Similarly, the teacher realizes that they must comply with the MELCs and deliver its standards rather than just teaching to the best of their abilities. Nevertheless, even with the

perceived amount of work that seems to confront teachers, they still perceive it worthwhile. The statement that yielded the least mean in the impression category says that teachers describe the MELCs as having little or no impact on their job. The said observation contrasts Murphy and Torff (2014), who revealed in their study that teachers are stressed when presented with new standards. Such perception of teachers is interesting since implementing the MELCs requires new teaching modalities because its implementation is during the onset of the pandemic. Zara et al. (2022) explained that Filipino teachers have positive attitudes toward teaching and that even in difficult situations, they can adapt to the challenge. Montebon (2022) corroborates that Filipino teachers possessed a positive attitude when confronted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study's results support the observation of the said researchers on Filipino teachers' resilience.

While teachers are generally optimistic about their experiences teaching the MELCs, they express concerns about how they can be informed of new developments and make their voices heard. Teachers have the lowest mean rating on the statement describing their voice on policy formation for the relatively new curriculum. The teacher-centered approach to curriculum development is essential for MELCs to be successful. When their voices are not heard, it may lead to dissatisfaction among teachers (Dammak, 2017), leading to a decrease in student achievement or, even worse, student failure.

With all other positive perceptions of teachers on MELCs, policymakers need to explore options that would allow them to hear ideas from teachers. Teachers are the main actors in curriculum implementation; therefore, their opinions matter.

Conclusion and suggestions

The findings of this study reveal that, overall, teachers' levels of agreement on the perceptions statements regarding the MELCs released by the Department of Education are at a moderate level.

The results also indicate no significant difference in gender, years of teaching experience, type of school, and academic preparations.

These findings offer insights into how teachers in the Philippines perceive the K to 12 curricula. The researcher suggests that similar studies should be conducted to assess this curriculum's maturity. However, many questions still need to be answered regarding teacher perceptions of this program. For instance, what is their level of knowledge regarding these standards? Is it sufficient enough for them to implement them? What are their sentiments towards this program? What support do they need to effectively implement these standards?

New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

The results of the study identify several implications on teacher preparation and practices. Primarily, the results suggest areas that the findings could have implications for educational policy and teacher professional development programs. The uniformity in perceptions across various demographic categories indicates that a more general approach may be effective in implementing or refining the MELCs. A professional program development for teachers on general topics and curriculum context can be in design.

Another insight can be implied on the possibility of consensus building. The moderate level of agreement implies that there is room for improvement in achieving a higher consensus among teachers. This might be an opportunity for educational authorities to engage teachers in

further discussions, workshops, or collaborative activities to enhance understanding and consensus on the MELCs.

Lastly is the need for further research. While this study provides valuable insights on curricular perception, it also opens avenues for further research. Exploring the reasons behind the moderate agreement, conducting qualitative research to delve deeper into teachers' perspectives, or assessing the practical implications of these perceptions in the classroom could be areas for future investigation.

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