



Relearning What Matters: The MELCs as a Crisis Curriculum Reform

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schooling worldwide and forced education systems to reconsider what knowledge and skills are most critical when time, access, and support are limited. In Philippines, the Department of Education responded by introducing the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs), a prioritized set of learning outcomes derived from the K to 12 Curriculum to guide instruction, assessment, and learning material development across flexible learning modalities. This article examines MELCs as a crisis curriculum reform aimed at sustaining learning continuity while addressing curriculum congestion and widening inequities during emergency schooling. Using a conceptual and literature-based analysis, the paper synthesizes policy rationales, implementation expectations, and research-informed arguments on curriculum coherence, teacher agency, and cognitive load, and extends the discussion through parallels with Indigenous education frameworks in Navajo Nation and Bureau of Indian Education contexts. Findings are presented as themes highlighting prioritization for equity, depth-over-breadth learning, professional judgment in contextualization, and culturally sustaining approaches to essential learning. The paper argues that crisis-driven curriculum prioritization can strengthen educational quality when paired with coherence, trust in educators, and attention to learner well-being and cultural relevance.

Subject Areas

Education, Special Education, Educational Psychology, Sociology

Keywords

Curriculum Prioritization, Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs), COVID-19, Curriculum Coherence, Teacher Agency

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered abrupt shifts to modular, online, blended, and distance learning, compelling education systems to balance learning continuity with feasibility amid severe constraints in time, connectivity, teacher capacity, and home learning support [1]. In Philippines, these constraints amplified long-standing concerns about curriculum congestion and unequal learning conditions, increasing pressure to reduce overload without lowering standards or weakening alignment to expected learning outcomes [2].

In response, the Department of Education embedded curriculum streamlining within the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP), explicitly identifying the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) as a key strategy for operationalizing continuity across multiple delivery modalities during the extraordinary school year [3]. Rather than serving as a replacement for the full K to 12 Curriculum Guides, MELCs were positioned as a prioritized set of competencies designed to focus instruction on the most indispensable outcomes while easing the practical burden of converting classroom-oriented resources into distance-learning materials. This design logic mirrors international learning recovery guidance that urges systems to “prioritize the fundamentals”, strengthen flexible learning models, and implement coherent approaches that connect curriculum, instruction, assessment, and remediation in order to prevent learning loss from becoming entrenched, especially for the most disadvantaged learners [4].

Conceptually, MELCs can be understood as a crisis curriculum governance instrument that translates broad curriculum ideals into a smaller, teachable set of expectations and thereby supports curriculum coherence, clarifying what should be taught, assessed, and mastered when instructional contact is fragmented. This coherence-oriented move is also consistent with research on cognitive load and depth-over-breadth learning, which suggests that reducing competing content demands can increase the likelihood that learners will engage meaningfully with core concepts and retain transferable knowledge under stressful conditions [5].

At the implementation level, emerging Philippine studies indicate that MELCs became a primary reference for lesson planning, learning activity design, and assessment development, supporting more realistic weekly learning targets and clearer monitoring practices [6] [7]. However, these studies also show that successful enactment varies by local capacity and is shaped by persistent challenges such as limited learning resources, uneven parental support, and constraints in home learning environments, underscoring that prioritization must be paired with structured school leadership supports and targeted equity measures if it is to produce consistent learning opportunities [8].

Taken together, this context clarifies why MELCs are best interpreted not as a temporary list reduction but as a reform that re-centers “what matters” in crisis schooling: essential learning, coherent assessment alignment, teacher agency for contextualization, and sustained attention to equity and learner well-being, principles echoed across global learning recovery and resilience agendas.

2. Literature Review

The literature on curriculum responses to COVID-19 emphasizes that emergency remote education forced systems to decide which knowledge and skills were truly essential when instructional time, connectivity, and support were severely constrained. International frameworks argue that prioritizing a smaller set of core competencies can protect learning continuity and equity, particularly for students in marginalized and low-resource contexts [9]. In this view, curriculum reduction is not a lowering of standards, but a reordering of expectations toward foundational, high-leverage outcomes that enable further learning.

Research on curriculum coherence suggests that tightly aligned, well-articulated learning progressions support deeper conceptual understanding more effectively than broad coverage of many discrete topics. Coherent curricula help teachers plan instruction, assessment, and remediation around a limited number of central ideas, an approach that becomes especially important during crises when opportunities to revisit content are reduced. Studies on MELCs implementation in Philippine schools report that the framework has been widely adopted to align lesson planning, classroom assessment, and monitoring to a defined set of essential competencies, though teachers still grapple with resource limitations and contextual challenges [10].

Teacher agency is another key theme in the literature on crisis schooling. Analyses of COVID-19 responses highlight that policies which permit professional judgment in adapting curriculum to local conditions are more likely to produce relevant, engaging learning experiences than rigid enforcement of centralized prescriptions [11]. In the Philippine setting, MELCs' documentation and subsequent studies show that teachers and school heads are expected to interpret and localize the competencies according to community conditions, available technologies, and home learning arrangements—an expectation that both recognizes and stretches their professional capacity.

Learning sciences research, particularly cognitive load theory, supports curriculum designs that reduce extraneous load and allow learners to concentrate on core concepts through manageable tasks and sustained practice. During the pandemic, such designs are linked to better retention and transfer because they help learners focus amid stress, anxiety, and competing demands at home. Philippine learning continuity plans and MELCs-related studies describe how fewer, clearer targets can make it easier for teachers to design focused activities and for learners and parents to understand what must be accomplished within a given period.

Finally, Indigenous and culturally sustaining education scholarship warns that standardized and congested curricula have often sidelined local knowledge systems, heritage languages, and community priorities [12]. Culturally responsive and culturally sustaining frameworks call for curriculum work that centers community-based knowledge, identity affirmation, and language revitalization while still meeting academic expectations [13]. Comparative work in Navajo and other Indigenous contexts indicates that streamlined, culturally grounded curricula can

increase learner engagement, comprehension, and persistence, especially when families and communities are treated as partners in defining “what matters” in schooling [14].

3. Methodology/Approach

This article adopts a qualitative, conceptual approach grounded in integrative literature review and policy/document analysis to examine the MELCs as a crisis curriculum reform. Rather than generating new empirical data from fieldwork, the study synthesizes existing research, policy texts, and conceptual frameworks to develop a holistic understanding of how curriculum prioritization operated in the Philippine context and how it resonates with Indigenous education perspectives [15].

First, an integrative review logic informs the selection and use of sources [16] [17]. The paper brings together diverse forms of evidence, such as national policy documents on MELCs and learning continuity, empirical studies on MELCs implementation, international reports on COVID-19 education responses, and foundational and recent literature on curriculum coherence, cognitive load, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Integrative reviews allow the combination of theoretical and empirical work across methodological traditions to construct a broad, conceptually rich picture of a phenomenon, which is appropriate for examining MELCs as both policy text and lived reform in schools. *Second*, qualitative document and policy analysis strategies guide the reading of MELCs-related texts and Indigenous education documents. For transparency, the document analysis includes key DepEd policy texts on curriculum prioritization and learning continuity, specifically: 1) DepEd’s “Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs)” document (DepEd, 2020) and 2) [18], “Adoption of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) for School Year 2020-2021 in the light of the COVID-19 public health emergency”. Policy documents, curriculum guides, and learning continuity plans are treated as texts that encode assumptions about what counts as essential learning, how responsibility is distributed among system actors, and how equity is conceptualized.

Third, a thematic synthesis lens is used to organize insights across sources into the core themes presented in the findings section: curriculum reduction as strategic coherence, equity through essential foundations, depth over breadth, teacher agency and contextualization, and cultural relevance with Indigenous parallels. Individual studies and policy texts are not weighed for statistical effect but for their conceptual contributions to these themes, in line with qualitative synthesis practices that prioritize meaning, patterns, and explanatory power.

Finally, a comparative interpretive frame links the Philippine MELCs’ experience with Indigenous and Navajo/Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) Curriculum work by reading these bodies of literature side by side. This paper selects Navajo Nation and Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) contexts as the primary comparative framework because both settings, like Philippines during pandemic disrupt-

tion, involve schooling under structural constraints (e.g., uneven infrastructure and resource access), heightened equity concerns for historically marginalized learner populations, and ongoing tensions between centralized standards and local/cultural knowledge priorities. The comparison is also analytically useful because both contexts foreground culturally sustaining aims, such as protecting community knowledge, language, identity, and well-being, while simultaneously negotiating system-level accountability and curricular coherence demands, making them relevant mirrors for interpreting MELCs as a crisis-driven prioritization reform. By doing so, the analysis explores how different systems use curriculum prioritization to reclaim space for relevance, community knowledge, and learner well-being, while still pursuing academic rigor under challenging conditions [19]. This approach does not claim symmetrical equivalence between contexts; rather, it uses comparison to surface shared principles and tensions that can inform future curriculum reforms in crisis and post-crisis settings.

4. Themes

Theme 1: Curriculum reduction as strategic coherence

MELCs are framed not as a simple trimming of the K to 12 Curriculum but as a deliberate reorganization that retains, merges, or temporarily drops competencies based on 1) prerequisite value, 2) alignment with key goals, 3) relevance, and 4) feasibility under constrained conditions. This process reflects the curriculum coherence literature, which argues that a focused set of connected standards enables more deliberate instructional planning and assessment than a long list of isolated objectives. Empirical studies of MELCs utilization show that many schools have used the competencies to structure lesson plans, weekly learning schedules, and assessments around clearer, more realistic targets, even as they navigate resource and workload challenges.

Theme 2: Equity through essential foundations

A second theme is that prioritization is explicitly linked to equity by seeking to guarantee that all learners, particularly those in low-income, rural, or otherwise marginalized settings, receive opportunities to master core competencies despite disrupted schooling. International reports on learning recovery emphasize that focusing on foundational literacy, numeracy, and key cross-cutting skills is an efficient way to mitigate learning loss and prevent further widening of achievement gaps. Recent Philippine research indicates that when MELCs are used to design realistic tasks and aligned assessments, teachers find it easier to identify who has mastered the essentials and who needs targeted remediation.

Theme 3: Depth over breadth for quality and well-being

The MELCs reform emphasizes depth over breadth by reducing the number of expected competencies and encouraging repeated, meaningful engagement with core ideas, skills, and values. From a cognitive load perspective, this approach may improve long-term retention and transfer by limiting extraneous demands and allowing learners to focus on essential content, an advantage that becomes crucial

when learners are facing psychological stress and limited instructional contact. School and classroom accounts from the pandemic suggest that a narrower set of goals can help reduce pressure on students and families, making learning tasks more manageable and supporting better mental health and motivation.

Theme 4: Teacher agency and contextualization

Implementation of MELCs rests heavily on teacher and school leader agency, as they are tasked with contextualizing essential competencies to local settings, languages, and modalities. This theme resonates with broader research on teacher agency in crisis, which finds that flexible policy frameworks can empower educators to design relevant tasks, adapt pacing, and choose assessment methods that fit learners. At the same time, recent MELCs studies point out that teachers often shoulder additional burdens, such as creating home-based learning materials and coaching parents, which suggests that agency must be supported with professional development, time, and resources if it is to translate into equitable learning opportunities [20]. Without such supports, there is a potential risk of increased inequity: schools with fewer resources (e.g., limited learning materials, weaker connectivity, smaller support staff, less access to coaching) may struggle to contextualize the prioritized curriculum effectively, leading to uneven implementation quality and widening gaps in learners' opportunities to master the same "essential" competencies across contexts.

Theme 5: Cultural relevance and Indigenous parallels

A final theme is the conceptual parallel between MELCs and Indigenous curriculum reforms that seek to reclaim instructional space for culturally meaningful, community-grounded learning. In Navajo Nation and other Indigenous contexts, policy and research highlight the need for curricula that integrate language, culture, relationships, and harmony with the natural world across subject areas, rather than treating these as add-ons. Studies of culturally sustaining pedagogy argue that prioritizing essential competencies should go hand in hand with centering local knowledge and identity, reinforcing this paper's claim that streamlined curricula can be a vehicle for both academic rigor and cultural affirmation.

5. Discussions

MELCs can be understood as a crisis governance instrument that converts broad curriculum ideals into a smaller, teachable set of expectations intended to function across modular, online, blended, and distance modalities. Framed through the lens of curriculum coherence, this move signifies a shift from valuing the quantity of content covered to valuing the clarity and connectedness of what is taught and assessed, which is vital when instructional hours and contact are fragmented. Recent analyses of MELCs' implementation in various Philippine divisions show that the document has indeed become a primary reference for planning and monitoring, though the quality of alignment between intended, taught, and assessed curricula varies with local capacity.

The discussion of teacher agency highlights both opportunity and risk. On one

hand, a prioritized curriculum creates room for teachers to design more context-responsive pathways, integrate formative assessments, and adjust pacing to learners' actual progress, such as practices associated with higher engagement and more equitable outcomes in the literature on crisis schooling. On the other hand, empirical studies document that teachers report heavy workloads, limited training, and uneven parental support when implementing MELCs, suggesting that flexibility alone does not guarantee successful contextualization. The effectiveness of MELCs as a reform therefore depends not only on the list of competencies but also on sustained investments in professional learning, collaborative planning structures, and school-level leadership that coordinates curriculum, delivery modalities, and assessment.

Equity is a recurring concern running through both MELCs' policy documents and post-pandemic evaluations. Prioritization has helped some schools simplify expectations, communicate clearer goals to families, and design assessments that reflect what was actually taught, all of which are important steps toward fairer learning opportunities. Yet, persistent gaps in technology access, family resources, and community support mean that many learners experience MELCs-mediated instruction in very different ways, reinforcing international warnings that curriculum reforms must be coupled with targeted support for the most disadvantaged groups if learning loss is to be reduced rather than reproduced.

The Indigenous and Navajo parallels extend this discussion beyond Philippines by illustrating that "relearning what matters" is not just a technical problem of selecting standards, but also a political and cultural question about whose knowledge counts in school. Indigenous education literature and recent work on culturally sustaining and revitalizing leadership emphasize that community-defined values, relationships, and languages should shape curriculum priorities, especially when systems are rethinking content under crisis conditions. When viewed together, MELCs and Indigenous reforms suggest that crisis-driven curriculum prioritization can become a pathway toward more culturally grounded, community-responsive schooling—if decision-making processes meaningfully involve educators, families, and communities rather than treating them as implementers of a centrally produced list [21].

6. Conclusions

The MELCs initiative demonstrates how crisis conditions can catalyze curriculum reform that shifts systems from content coverage toward coherence, feasibility, and mastery of foundational learning outcomes. Rather than functioning as a simplified curriculum, MELCs operated as a prioritized framework intended to preserve learning continuity across flexible modalities while acknowledging time, access, and support constraints.

Evidence and arguments synthesized in this paper indicate that curriculum prioritization can support equity when it protects minimum opportunities to learn for marginalized students and reduces the instructional overload that often wid-

ens achievement gaps during disruptions. At the same time, MELCs implementation highlights that prioritization alone is insufficient: the equity and quality benefits depend on how well schools align instruction and assessment to essential competencies and how effectively teachers are supported to contextualize learning for diverse home and community realities.

The MELCs experience also underscores the expanded role of teacher agency in crisis reforms, as teachers and school leaders become key curriculum decision-makers responsible for pacing, contextualization, and assessment design under uneven conditions. When paired with professional trust, coherent guidance, and capacity-building support, such agency can increase relevance and learner engagement rather than reproduce rigid, inequitable curriculum delivery.

Finally, examining MELCs alongside Indigenous and Navajo/BIE education perspectives reinforces that meaningful learning is not determined by the quantity of standards taught but by the relevance, cultural grounding, and depth of understanding learners can achieve. As systems move beyond emergency responses, lessons from MELCs suggest that future curriculum reforms—especially in culturally diverse, rural, and Indigenous contexts—should treat prioritization, contextualization, and learner well-being as core design principles rather than temporary accommodations.

7. Implications

Policy: Rapid curriculum prioritization protocols

Education systems should institutionalize standing “rapid curriculum prioritization” protocols that can be activated during pandemics, disasters, conflict, or prolonged school interruptions. To clarify governance, the trigger for activating these protocols should be issued at the national level (e.g., DepEd Central Office), with defined criteria for when regional/division offices may recommend or request activation based on localized disruptions. These protocols should include 1) explicit criteria for selecting essential outcomes (e.g., prerequisite value, leverage across subjects, relevance, feasibility), and 2) a timetable and governance process for reviewing, validating, and communicating the prioritized set to schools and stakeholders. Because prioritized curricula only work when assessment matches what is taught, the protocol should also require constructive alignment among competencies, instruction, and assessment, supported by official assessment guidance during disruption periods (e.g., interim grading/assessment policies and clear expectations for formative evidence). DepEd’s MELCs policy experience further implies that national policy should not only publish competencies but also provide companion implementation supports (learning resources, teacher development, and monitoring mechanisms) to prevent uneven uptake across divisions and schools.

School leadership: Structured supports for contextualization

School leaders should treat contextualization as a managed instructional change process rather than an individual teacher task. This requires protected planning

time for collaborative lesson design, coaching or learning-action-cell structures that help teachers interpret essential competencies consistently, and routine “alignment checks” that review whether weekly plans, learning tasks, and assessments map to MELCs (or the localized essential set). OECD policy work on resilience and implementation underscores that reforms succeed when systems strengthen educator capacity and create supportive conditions for practice change, rather than relying on compliance alone. At the school level, this also means organizing targeted supports for teachers who handle the highest-need learners (e.g., multi-grade settings, SPED, rural modular delivery), so that teacher agency yields coherence and equity rather than fragmentation.

Teaching and learning: Mastery, formative evidence, and well-being

Classroom implementation should emphasize mastery-based pacing: fewer competencies, revisited through deliberate practice, feedback, and remediation until learners demonstrate understanding. This aligns with the MELCs’ intent to shift from coverage to mastery and reduces overload during constrained instructional time. Teachers should prioritize formative assessment evidence (short checks for understanding, performance tasks aligned to essentials, feedback loops) because formative information is what enables targeted remediation and learning recovery when learners’ opportunities to learn vary widely. Given the stress conditions described during emergency schooling, well-being should be built into instruction through manageable task design, realistic workload expectations, and supportive teacher-learner communication, so “essential learning” remains achievable and motivating.

Equity and culture: Culturally sustaining contextualization

Curriculum prioritization should explicitly protect space for culturally sustaining teaching—especially in Indigenous and rural contexts—by encouraging teachers to connect essential competencies to local language practices, community knowledge, and place-based realities. Recent culturally sustaining guidance emphasizes partnering with Indigenous communities and centering cultural and linguistic identities in curriculum and feedback cycles, rather than treating culture as an optional enrichment layer. This implies that contextualization should be supported through community engagement structures (e.g., consultations with elders and families, co-developed learning examples, locally relevant performance tasks), so that essentials are taught through culturally meaningful contexts while still meeting academic goals. For MELCs-type reforms, equity work should therefore be defined not only as access to prioritized competencies but also as access to identity-affirming learning experiences and culturally valid demonstrations of learning.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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