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Revisiting Dewey's Philosophy in the Context of the MATATAG Curriculum

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Abstract

This article revisits John Dewey's progressive educational philosophy and examines its relevance to the MATATAG Curriculum recently introduced by the Philippine Department of Education. Grounded in Dewey's theory of experiential learning and democratic pedagogy, the study explores how six core principles, individuality, free activity, experience-based learning, meaningful engagement, relevance to present life, and adaptability, are reflected in the MATATAG framework. Using qualitative document analysis of DepEd curriculum policies and implementation guidelines, the paper assesses the alignment between Dewey's ideals and the curriculum's learner-centered goals.

Findings reveal conceptual congruence, particularly in the curriculum's emphasis on inquiry-based learning, contextualized instruction, and holistic development. However, systemic challenges persist inconsistent teacher preparation, resource disparities between urban and rural schools, and the dominance of standardized testing undermine the full realization of Deweyan principles. These gaps highlight the tension between progressive educational theory and entrenched classroom practices.

The study concludes that while the MATATAG Curriculum offers a promising foundation for progressive reform, its success depends on sustained investment in teacher training, equitable resource allocation, and assessment reform. Recommendations include strengthening professional development programs, expanding experiential learning opportunities, and shifting toward formative assessments that prioritize critical thinking and real-world application. These steps are essential to ensure that Dewey's vision of education as a transformative, student-centered process is meaningfully embedded in Philippine basic education.

Keywords: *Curriculum Development, Dewey Philosophy, MATATAG Curriculum*

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INTRODUCTION

John Dewey's educational philosophy remains a foundational framework for progressive pedagogy, emphasizing experiential learning, democratic participation, and the cultivation of individuality. His seminal works, Democracy and Education and Experience and Education, argue that education must be rooted in lived experience and oriented toward social transformation. Dewey's vision of learning as an active, student-centered process continues to influence global curriculum reforms, particularly those seeking to bridge academic knowledge with real-world relevance.[1]

In the Philippine context, the Department of Education's MATATAG Curriculum represents a strategic recalibration of the K to 12 Basic Education Program. Introduced in 2023, MATATAG is structured around four essential components: (1) making the curriculum relevant to produce competent, job-ready, active, and responsible citizens; (2) accelerating the delivery of basic education facilities and services; (3) promoting learner well-being, inclusive education, and a positive learning environment; and (4) supporting teachers to teach better.[2] These priorities reflect DepEd's commitment to transforming education into a more holistic, equitable, and future-ready system. The curriculum's emphasis on foundational skills, contextualized instruction, and 21st-century competencies, particularly its focus on literacy, numeracy, and learner well-being as articulated in official DepEd materials, aligns conceptually with Dewey's progressive ideals of experiential learning and democratic participation.[3]

Scholars such as Fra Andrew Maria have argued that Dewey's pragmatic approach offers a scaffold for transforming Philippine education, especially in the face of declining student performance and systemic inequities.[4] Dewey's insistence that education must be socially responsive and culturally grounded resonates with calls for localized, inclusive curriculum design. Earl John Acob's analysis further highlights how Dewey's principles have historically shaped

1 John Dewey, Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

2 Department of Education, "MATATAG Curriculum," Republic of the Philippines, accessed October 31, 2025, https://www.deped.gov.ph/matatag-curriculum/.

3 John Dewey, Experience and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

4 Fra Andrew Maria, "Empowering Learning: Dewey's Pragmatic Approach as a Scaffold for the MATATAG Curriculum," Prezi, November 17, 2024, https://prezi.com/p/vrv2qnlzocp2/.

Philippine teaching methods, particularly through experiential learning and democratic classroom practices.[5]

Despite these philosophical alignments, gaps persist. Existing literature points to challenges in teacher preparation, resource disparities, and the dominance of standardized testing—factors that undermine the full realization of Deweyan ideals in Philippine schools. Bernardo emphasizes that while learner-centered pedagogies are promoted in policy, their implementation is constrained by institutional inertia and uneven access to training and materials.[6] Similarly, Salandanan underscores the need for culturally responsive curricula that reflect Filipino values and realities.[7]

International literature reinforces these concerns. Fullan argues that successful curriculum reform requires coherence, capacity-building, and stakeholder engagement.[8] Darling-Hammond et al. advocate for equity-focused reforms that prioritize student agency, experiential learning, and culturally relevant pedagogy.[9] These studies suggest that philosophical alignment alone is insufficient; practical implementation must be supported by robust systems and sustained investment.

This study aims to address a critical research gap by offering a philosophical critique of the MATATAG Curriculum through Dewey's lens. It also aims to contribute to the discourse on progressive education in Southeast Asia, where systems must balance tradition with innovation and equity with excellence. By applying Dewey's principles to MATATAG's structure and implementation, the study evaluates the curriculum's transformative potential and proposes actionable reforms to bridge theory and practice.

The MATATAG Curriculum's structural reforms reflect a deliberate shift toward learner-centered education. It prioritizes five critical skills such as language, reading and literacy, mathematics, *makabansa*, and proper behavior and manners, across grade levels, with phased implementation from SY 2024–

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5 Earl John Acob, Educational Philosophy of J. Dewey in Philippine Setting, SlideShare, 2024, https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/educational_philosophy_of_j_dewey_in_phi-1-pdf/273978469.

6 Allan B. I. Bernardo, "Learner-Centered Education in the Philippines: Policy and Practice," *Asia Pacific Education Review* 5, no. 2 (2004): 125–135.

7 Gloria G. Salandanan, Teacher Education: Principles and Strategies (Quezon City: Lorimar Publishing, 2011).

8 Michael Fullan, The New Meaning of Educational Change, 4th ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

9 Linda Darling-Hammond et al., Educating for a Changing World: Global Perspectives on Curriculum Reform (New York: Routledge, 2020).

2025 to SY 2027–2028.[10] These priorities echo Dewey's call for education that is both foundational and socially responsive. Dewey argued that schools should not merely transmit information but cultivate habits of inquiry, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement.[11] The MATATAG framework, with its emphasis on values education and contextualized instruction, attempts to operationalize these ideals within the Philippine setting.

However, the curriculum's rollout reveals tensions between philosophical aspiration and systemic realities. One major challenge is the uneven capacity of schools to implement experiential learning strategies. Dewey emphasized the importance of "learning by doing," yet many Philippine schools, especially in rural areas, lack the resources, infrastructure, and teacher training to support project-based learning, fieldwork, or community engagement.[12] Studies by Salandanan and Bernardo confirm that while progressive pedagogies are embedded in policy, their classroom application is often limited by logistical constraints and entrenched traditional practices.[13]

Teacher preparation remains a critical bottleneck. Dewey believed that educators must be facilitators of inquiry, not mere transmitters of content.[14] The MATATAG Curriculum includes provisions for Teacher Professional Development (TPD), but implementation varies widely across regions.[15] Fullan's work on educational change emphasizes that reform must be accompanied by sustained capacity-building and professional learning communities.[7] Without consistent support, teachers may revert to didactic methods, undermining the curriculum's learner-centered goals.

Assessment practices also pose a philosophical dilemma. Dewey advocated for formative, reflective evaluation that captures student growth and engagement.[16] In contrast, the Philippine system remains heavily reliant on summative assessments, including the National Achievement Test (NAT) and

10 Department of Education, "MATATAG Curriculum Implementation Timeline," Republic of the Philippines, accessed October 31, 2025, https://www.deped.gov.ph/matatag-curriculum/..

11 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 1916.

12 Gloria G. Salandanan, Teacher Education: Principles and Strategies (Quezon City: Lorimar Publishing, 2011).

13 Allan B. I. Bernardo, "Learner-Centered Education in the Philippines: Policy and Practice," Asia Pacific Education Review 5, no. 2 (2004): 125–135.

14 Dewey, Experience and Education, 1938.

15 Department of Education, "Teacher Professional Development Guidelines," 2023.

16 Dewey, Experience and Education, 1938.

Grade 12 Exit Exams.[17] While MATATAG promotes authentic assessment, the pressure to perform on standardized tests often leads to rote memorization and surface-level learning. Darling-Hammond et al. argue that meaningful reform requires a shift toward assessments that value creativity, problem-solving, and real-world application.[18] This tension between policy and practice reflects a broader challenge in aligning Deweyan ideals with institutional structures.

Moreover, the curriculum's adaptability to local contexts is uneven. Dewey insisted that education must be rooted in the lived experiences of learners.[19] MATATAG's School-Based Management (SBM) framework allows for localized curriculum adjustments, but implementation depends on the initiative and capacity of individual schools.[20] In underserved communities, limited access to technology, instructional materials, and community partnerships hampers the realization of contextualized learning. This reinforces educational inequities and undermines the curriculum's inclusive intent.

Despite these challenges, the MATATAG Curriculum represents a significant philosophical advancement. Its emphasis on holistic development, learner agency, and social relevance aligns with Dewey's vision of education as a tool for democratic life. The curriculum's integration of values education, life skills, and 21st-century competencies reflects a commitment to preparing students not just for employment, but for ethical participation in society.[21]

To fully realize this vision, systemic reforms are necessary. These include expanding teacher training programs, investing in school infrastructure, and revising assessment frameworks to prioritize formative evaluation. Dewey's philosophy reminds us that education is not merely a technical endeavor but a moral and civic one.[22] The MATATAG Curriculum, if supported by coherent policy and practice, has the potential to transform Philippine education into a more equitable, experiential, and future-ready system.

While existing discussions tend to highlight the alignment between progressive educational philosophies and contemporary curriculum reforms, such alignment often remains at the level of policy articulation rather than pedagogical realization. In the case of the MATATAG Curriculum, Deweyan

17 Department of Education, "National Assessment Framework," 2023.

18 Linda Darling-Hammond et al., Educating for a Changing World: Global Perspectives on Curriculum Reform (New York: Routledge, 2020).

19 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 1916.

20 Department of Education, "School-Based Management Policy Guidelines," 2023.

21 Department of Education, "MATATAG Curriculum Framework," 2023.

22 Dewey, Experience and Education, 1938.

principles are conceptually embedded within official documents; however, the extent to which these principles are substantively operationalized in educational practice remains less examined.

This study, therefore, moves beyond identifying philosophical congruence and instead interrogates how Deweyan ideas are represented, interpreted, and potentially limited within the MATATAG framework. It asks not only whether Dewey is present in the curriculum, but how that presence functions, whether as a guiding pedagogical force, a partial influence, or a largely symbolic reference within policy discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative document analysis approach to examine the alignment between Dewey's educational philosophy and the MATATAG Curriculum. Primary sources include official DepEd policy documents, curriculum frameworks, and implementation guidelines released between 2022 and 2024. These texts were analyzed using thematic coding based on Dewey's six core principles: individuality, free activity, experience-based learning, meaningful engagement, relevance to present life, and adaptability.

The analysis follows a deductive framework, using Dewey's principles as predefined categories to assess the presence, depth, and operationalization of progressive ideals within the MATATAG Curriculum. Supplementary sources include scholarly articles, educational commentaries, and practitioner reflections that contextualize the curriculum's rollout and challenges. The study also draws on comparative literature from international curriculum reform efforts to situate the Philippine experience within broader global trends.

This study draws on a defined corpus of official policy texts issued by the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) related to the MATATAG Curriculum. These include: (1) the MATATAG Curriculum Framework, which outlines the philosophical direction and structural priorities of the reform; (2) the MATATAG Curriculum Implementation Timeline, which details the phased rollout across grade levels; and (3) key implementation and support documents such as the School-Based Management Policy Guidelines, Teacher Professional Development Guidelines, Performance Task Guidelines, and Values Education Framework.

The aforementioned documents were selected as primary sources of curricular discourse, as they articulate both the intended philosophical orientation and the operational mechanisms of the MATATAG reform. Supplementary materials, including official DepEd web publications and

policy summaries, were also consulted to contextualize the framing and public communication of the curriculum.

By delimiting the analysis to these specific texts, the study ensures that interpretations of Deweyan principles are grounded in identifiable policy artifacts rather than generalized descriptions of the reform.

Limitations of the study include the absence of direct classroom observation and teacher interviews, which are beyond the scope of this document-based inquiry. However, the richness of policy texts and the availability of implementation reports provide sufficient material for a robust philosophical and structural critique.

DISCUSSION

Dewey's Educational Framework as Philosophical Lens

John Dewey's educational philosophy is not merely a pedagogical model; it is a moral, epistemological, and civic framework that redefines the purpose of schooling in a democratic society. At its core, Dewey's philosophy rests on the belief that education is life itself, not merely a preparation for life.[23] This principal challenges traditional models of schooling that treat knowledge as static content to be transmitted. Instead, Dewey positions education as a dynamic, experiential process rooted in the learner's interaction with their environment.

Education as Growth and Reconstruction of Experience

Dewey's concept of education as growth is foundational. He argues that learning must emerge from the continuity of experience, where each new experience builds upon and transforms the previous one.[24] This principle, known as the principle of continuity, insists that education must be rooted in the learner's lived reality. Dewey writes, "Every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences."[25]

This view positions the learner not as a passive recipient of knowledge but as an active participant in meaning-making. It also implies that curriculum

23 John Dewey, Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 1.

24 John Dewey, Experience and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 28–29.

25 Ibid., 35.

must be flexible, responsive, and grounded in the learner's context, an idea that resonates deeply with the MATATAG Curriculum's emphasis on contextualized instruction.

Dewey's second principle, the principle of interaction, emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between the learner and their environment.[26] Learning occurs when the individual engages with their surroundings in ways that provoke reflection, adaptation, and growth. This interaction is not limited to physical stimuli but includes social, emotional, and cultural dimensions. Dewey's insistence on the social nature of learning anticipates contemporary theories of constructivism and sociocultural pedagogy.

Democracy and Education: The Ethical Imperative

Dewey's educational theory is inseparable from his democratic ideals. He believed that schools are microcosms of society and must cultivate habits of cooperation, critical inquiry, and ethical reflection.[27] Education, for Dewey, is the means by which a democratic society reproduces itself, not through indoctrination, but through the development of reflective, socially engaged individuals.

The aforementioned ethical dimension is often overlooked in technocratic curriculum reforms. Dewey's insistence that education must serve both individual growth and collective well-being offers a powerful critique of systems that prioritize test scores over civic engagement. The MATATAG Curriculum's inclusion of values education and "*makabansa*" competencies reflect a partial alignment with this vision, though the depth of its democratic orientation still needs to be examined.

Dewey's notion of democracy is not limited to political structures, it is a way of life characterized by participation, communication, and shared inquiry.[28] In this sense, education becomes a moral enterprise, where students learn to navigate complexity, respect diversity, and contribute to the common good. Dewey's emphasis on ethical reasoning and social responsibility challenges educators to move beyond content delivery and toward the cultivation of character and citizenship.

26 Ibid., 39

27 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 87–88.

28 Ibid., 101-102

Dewey's Six Principles: A Philosophical Framework for Curriculum Critique

To operationalize Dewey's philosophy in curriculum analysis, this study adopts six interrelated principles derived from his major works. Each principle is not merely a pedagogical suggestion but a philosophical stance on what it means to educate human beings in a democratic society.

1. Individuality. Education must recognize and cultivate the unique potential of each learner. Dewey rejected one-size-fits-all approaches and emphasized the importance of personal growth, self-expression, and agency.[29] He argued that individuality is not isolation but the capacity to contribute meaningfully to a community. In Dewey's view, the school must be a place where students discover their interests, talents, and values through active engagement.

This principal challenges standardized curricula that treat students as homogeneous units. It calls for differentiated instruction, flexible pathways, and opportunities for self-directed learning. In the Philippine context, where diversity in language, culture, and socioeconomic background is profound, the principle of individuality demands a curriculum that is inclusive, responsive, and empowering.

2. Free Activity. Learning should be inquiry-driven, allowing students to explore, question, and construct knowledge. Dewey believed that freedom in education does not mean the absence of structure but the presence of meaningful choice and intellectual autonomy.[30] He warned against rigid routines and passive learning, advocating instead for environments that stimulate curiosity and experimentation.

Free activity is essential for developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It also fosters intrinsic motivation and a sense of ownership over learning. In practice, this principle supports project-based learning, interdisciplinary inquiry, and student-led initiatives. It requires teachers to shift from authoritative figures to facilitators of exploration, a transformation that demands professional development and cultural change.

3. Experience-Based Learning. Knowledge must be grounded in real-life experiences that are meaningful to the learner. Dewey's theory of experience emphasizes the integration of thought and action, reflection, and practice.[31] He argued that abstract knowledge divorced from experience is inert

29 Ibid., 102.

30 Dewey, Experience and Education, 60.

31 Ibid., 25.

and meaningless. Learning becomes powerful when it connects to the learner's world, when it helps them make sense of their lives and communities.

Experience-based learning includes fieldwork, simulations, community engagement, and hands-on activities. It also involves emotional and ethical dimensions, as students grapple with real-world dilemmas and social issues. In the Philippine context, this principle supports contextualized instruction that draws on local culture, history, and challenges. It also aligns with the MATATAG Curriculum's emphasis on relevance and application.

4. Meaningful Engagement. Curriculum must connect with the learner's interests, emotions, and social context. Dewey believed that engagement is not a matter of entertainment but of relevance and resonance.[32] Students must see themselves in the curriculum, they must feel that what they are learning matters to their lives and aspirations.

Meaningful engagement requires culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive materials, and participatory methods. It also involves emotional safety and relational trust, as students must feel valued and heard. In practice, this principle supports dialogic teaching, collaborative learning, and student voice. It challenges traditional models that prioritize coverage over connection.

5. Relevance to Present Life. Learning should address current realities and equip students to navigate them. Dewey argued that education must prepare students for the challenges of their time, not by predicting the future but by cultivating adaptability, resilience, and ethical judgment.[33] He emphasized that the curriculum must be rooted in the present, not the past or an imagined future.

This principle supports curriculum integration, thematic units, and real-world problem-solving. It also calls for responsiveness to social change, technological innovation, and global issues. In the Philippine context, relevance includes addressing poverty, climate change, digital literacy, and civic participation. It demands that education be both locally grounded and globally aware.

6. Adaptability. Education must prepare learners to respond to change, uncertainty, and complexity. Dewey believed that adaptability is not a skill but a disposition, a way of thinking and being that embraces growth and

32 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 209.

33 Ibid., 203-204

transformation.[34] He argued that rigid curricula and fixed outcomes undermine the very purpose of education in a democratic society.

Adaptability supports lifelong learning, interdisciplinary thinking, and innovation. It also involves ethical flexibility, the capacity to revise beliefs and actions in light of new evidence and perspectives. In practice, this principle supports formative assessment, reflective practice, and curriculum renewal. It challenges systems that prioritize stability over responsiveness.

The following analysis examines the MATATAG Curriculum not only as a structured reform initiative but as a site of philosophical articulation. While Deweyan principles may be identifiable within policy texts, it is necessary to critically assess the extent to which these principles are concretely embedded, selectively interpreted, or constrained by institutional realities. As such, the analysis attends to both the presence of Deweyan ideas and the tensions that emerge in their translation from policy to practice.

The MATATAG Curriculum: Structure and Stated Philosophical Intent

The MATATAG Curriculum, introduced by the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) in 2023, represents a strategic recalibration of the K to 12 Basic Education Program. It is framed around four essential components: (1) making the curriculum relevant to produce competent, job-ready, active, and responsible citizens; (2) accelerating the delivery of basic education facilities and services; (3) promoting learner well-being, inclusive education, and a positive learning environment; and (4) supporting teachers to teach better.[35] These pillars reflect DepEd's response to longstanding challenges in Philippine education, including declining student performance, resource disparities, and teacher burnout.

Philosophically, the MATATAG Curriculum signals a shift toward learner-centered education. Its emphasis on foundational skills, language, reading and literacy, mathematics, *makabansa*, and proper behavior and manners suggests a renewed focus on holistic development.[36] The inclusion of values education and civic competencies aligns with Dewey's belief that education must cultivate

34 Michael Fullan, The New Meaning of Educational Change, 4th ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007), 35–36.

35 Department of Education, "MATATAG Curriculum," Republic of the Philippines, accessed October 31, 2025, https://www.deped.gov.ph/matatag-curriculum/..

36 Ibid

ethical reasoning and democratic participation.[37] However, the curriculum's philosophical intent remains implicit rather than explicit. While Dewey foregrounded education as a moral and civic enterprise, MATATAG articulates its goals primarily in terms of relevance, efficiency, and support.

The curriculum's rollout is structured across four (4) school years, beginning with Kindergarten, Grades 1, 4, and 7 in SY 2024–2025, and culminating with Grade 10 in SY 2027–2028.[38] This phased implementation allows for gradual adaptation but also raises questions about coherence and continuity. Dewey's principle of continuity emphasizes that learning must build upon prior experiences in a seamless and meaningful way.[39] If curriculum reforms are introduced in fragmented stages, there is a risk that students will encounter disjointed learning experiences, undermining the very growth the curriculum seeks to promote.

MATATAG's stated emphasis on contextualized instruction resonates with Dewey's insistence that education must be rooted in the learner's lived reality.[40] DepEd's guidelines explicitly encourage schools to adapt instructional materials to "local contexts, languages, and cultural realities," positioning contextualization as a key mechanism for curriculum delivery. This approach reflects Dewey's principle of interaction, where learning emerges from the dynamic relationship between the student and their environment.[41] However, the operationalization of contextualization remains uneven. In practice, many schools lack the autonomy, resources, or training to meaningfully localize instruction.[42]

The curriculum also promotes inclusive education and learner well-being, echoing Dewey's ethical imperative that education must serve both individual and collective flourishing.[43] MATATAG includes provisions for mental health support, differentiated instruction, and inclusive classroom strategies, particularly through its emphasis on learner well-being and inclusive education as core reform pillars. These initiatives reflect a growing awareness of the

37 John Dewey, Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 87–88.

38 Department of Education, "MATATAG Curriculum Implementation Timeline," 2023.

39 John Dewey, Experience and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 28–29.

40 Department of Education, "School-Based Management Policy Guidelines," 2023.

41 Dewey, Experience and Education, 39.

42 Allan B. I. Bernardo, "Learner-Centered Education in the Philippines: Policy and Practice," Asia Pacific Education Review 5, no. 2 (2004): 125–135.

43 Gloria G. Salandanan, Teacher Education: Principles and Strategies (Quezon City: Lorimar Publishing, 2011).

emotional and social dimensions of learning. Dewey argued that education must engage the whole child, not just the intellect, but also the emotions, values, and relationships.[44] In this regard, MATATAG's holistic orientation marks a philosophical advancement over previous iterations of the K to 12 program.

Teacher support is another cornerstone of the MATATAG framework. DepEd has committed to enhancing professional development through formal Teacher Professional Development (TPD) guidelines, which aim to strengthen instructional capacity and reduce administrative burden.[45] Dewey believed that teachers are not mere transmitters of knowledge but facilitators of inquiry and growth.[46] For Deweyan pedagogy to flourish, teachers must be empowered to design meaningful learning experiences, foster democratic dialogue, and respond to student needs. MATATAG's recognition of teacher agency is philosophically sound, but its success depends on sustained investment and systemic reform.

Despite these philosophical alignments, the curriculum's language remains largely technocratic. Terms like "competent," "job-ready," and "delivery of services" reflect a managerial orientation that prioritizes efficiency over reflection. Dewey warned against reducing education to vocational training or bureaucratic metrics.[47] He argued that education must cultivate habits of mind, ethical judgment, and civic responsibility, not merely prepare students for employment. While MATATAG includes values education, its framing risks subordinating ethical development to economic utility.

Moreover, the curriculum's emphasis on foundational skills, while important, must be balanced with opportunities for creativity, inquiry, and interdisciplinary exploration. Dewey championed integrated learning that connects disciplines and fosters holistic understanding.[48] MATATAG's subject-based structure may limit cross-curricular connections unless explicitly designed to encourage them. The challenge lies in translating philosophical intent into pedagogical practice—ensuring that students experience learning as a coherent, meaningful, and transformative process.

In summary, the MATATAG Curriculum reflects several philosophical commitments that align with Dewey's educational framework: contextualization,

44 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 209.

45 Department of Education, "Teacher Professional Development Guidelines," 2023.

46 Dewey, Experience and Education, 60.

47 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 203–204.

48 Linda Darling-Hammond et al., Educating for a Changing World: Global Perspectives on Curriculum Reform (New York: Routledge, 2020).

inclusivity, holistic development, and teacher empowerment. However, its technocratic language, phased implementation, and uneven operationalization pose challenges to its transformative potential. To fully embody Dewey's vision, MATATAG must move beyond managerial reform and embrace education as a moral, experiential, and democratic endeavor.

From Policy Discourse to Educational Reality

While the MATATAG Curriculum articulates a set of reform-oriented principles that resonate with Deweyan educational philosophy, it is important to distinguish between curriculum as policy discourse and curriculum as lived educational practice. Policy documents often present aspirational visions of teaching and learning, framing desired outcomes and pedagogical directions. However, these articulations do not automatically translate into classroom realities.

In the case of MATATAG, many of the curriculum's Deweyan elements—such as contextualized instruction, learner-centered pedagogy, and holistic development—are clearly present in official texts. Yet their realization depends heavily on systemic conditions, including teacher preparedness, resource availability, institutional support, and local school contexts. As such, the presence of Deweyan principles in policy should not be equated with their full operationalization in practice.

This distinction becomes particularly evident when examining early implementation conditions. Reports and existing literature point to uneven teacher capacity, especially in facilitating inquiry-based and experiential learning. While the curriculum promotes performance tasks and active learning strategies, classroom enactment is often shaped by time constraints, large class sizes, and varying levels of professional development. In such contexts, progressive pedagogies may be simplified into procedural compliance rather than genuine inquiry-driven learning.

Moreover, certain conceptual inclusions within the MATATAG framework, such as collaborative and inquiry-oriented approaches akin to the Community of Inquiry model, remain insufficiently operationalized. These elements appear within the curriculum discourse but are not yet consistently embedded in classroom structures, suggesting a gap between conceptual adoption and pedagogical practice.

Assessment practices further illustrate this tension. Although MATATAG encourages authentic and formative assessment, the continued dominance of standardized testing frameworks influences instructional priorities. Teachers

may feel compelled to align instruction with measurable outcomes, thereby limiting opportunities for reflective, experience-based learning that Dewey advocates.

These conditions highlight a broader structural challenge: curriculum reform is not solely a matter of philosophical alignment, but of systemic coherence. Deweyan principles require not only curricular articulation but also institutional environments that support flexibility, teacher agency, and contextual responsiveness. Without these enabling conditions, progressive elements risk functioning as symbolic features of policy rather than transformative forces in practice.

Thus, while MATATAG represents a significant step toward progressive educational reform, its philosophical potential remains contingent. The translation of Deweyan ideals into meaningful classroom experiences depends on sustained investment in teacher development, equitable resource distribution, and the alignment of assessment systems with learner-centered goals. Recognizing this gap is not a critique of the curriculum's intent, but an essential step in understanding the complexity of educational change.

Deweyan Principles vs. MATATAG Realities

While the MATATAG Curriculum articulates reformist intentions that echo Deweyan ideals, its implementation reveals persistent tensions between philosophical aspiration and systemic constraint. This section applies Dewey's six core principles as a critical lens to examine how MATATAG performs in practice, highlighting both alignments and contradictions.

Table 1

Philosophical Tensions Between Dewey's Educational Principles and MATATAG Curriculum Implementation

Deweyan Principle	Philosophical Ideal	MATATAG Implementation Reality
Individuality	Cultivate each learner's unique potential	Standardized competencies limit personalization; individuality acknowledged but structurally constrained
Free Activity	Inquiry-driven, student-led exploration	Active learning encouraged, but often reduced to compliance due to time and training limitations
Experience-Based Learning	Ground knowledge in real-life, meaningful experiences	Contextualization promoted, but resource gaps hinder experiential learning in many schools

Deweyan Principle	Philosophical Ideal	MATATAG Implementation Reality
Meaningful Engagement	Connect learning to interests, emotions, and social context	Values education included, but curriculum overload and rigid pacing reduce depth of engagement
Relevance to Present Life	Prepare students for ethical, civic, and personal challenges of today	Framed around employability; broader relevance often subordinated to vocational outcomes
Adaptability	Foster flexibility, reflection, and responsiveness to change	Policy allows adaptation, but bureaucratic inertia and centralized control limit actual flexibility

1. Individuality vs. Standardization

Dewey emphasized that education must cultivate each learner's unique potential, recognizing individuality as essential to democratic life.[49] MATATAG's inclusion of differentiated instruction and contextualized learning suggests a commitment to this principle.[50] However, the curriculum remains tethered to standardized learning competencies and assessment frameworks that limit personalization.[51] Teachers often face pressure to "cover" prescribed content rather than adapt to student interests or needs. In practice, individuality is acknowledged rhetorically but constrained structurally.

This tension reflects a broader philosophical dilemma: can a national curriculum truly honor individual growth while enforcing uniform benchmarks? Dewey would argue that individuality must be nurtured through flexible environments, not rigid prescriptions.[52] MATATAG's challenge is to reconcile national coherence with local responsiveness, a balance that remains elusive.

2. Free Activity vs. Prescribed Pedagogy

Dewey's notion of free activity centers on inquiry, exploration, and student agency.[53] He believed that learning should be driven by curiosity

49 John Dewey, Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 102.

50 Department of Education, "MATATAG Curriculum Framework," 2023.

51 Allan B. I. Bernardo, "Learner-Centered Education in the Philippines: Policy and Practice," Asia Pacific Education Review 5, no. 2 (2004): 125–135.

52 Dewey, Experience and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 60.

53 Ibid., 61.

and guided by the learner's questions. MATATAG promotes active learning strategies, including performance tasks and project-based assessments, as outlined in the DepEd Performance Task Guidelines, which position learners as active participants in knowledge construction.[54] Yet classroom realities often default to teacher-centered instruction due to time constraints, large class sizes, and limited training.

The curriculum's structure, while encouraging activity, does not always empower teachers to facilitate genuine inquiry.[55] Dewey warned that freedom in education is not the absence of structure but the presence of meaningful choice. Without pedagogical autonomy and professional support, free activity risks becoming performative rather than transformative.

3. Experience-Based Learning vs. Resource Gaps

Dewey insisted that education must be grounded in real-life experience.[56] MATATAG's emphasis on contextualization and application reflects this principle. DepEd encourages the integration of local culture, community issues, and experiential tasks through its School-Based Management (SBM) guidelines, which advocate localized and context-responsive instruction.[57] However, many schools lack the resources, laboratories, field access, and community partnerships to implement experiential learning meaningfully.[58]

In rural and underserved areas, learning remains textbook-bound and abstract. Dewey would critique this as "inert knowledge", information disconnected from lived reality.[59] The curriculum's experiential intent is undermined by infrastructural inequities, revealing a philosophical gap between vision and viability.

4. Meaningful Engagement vs. Curriculum Overload

Dewey believed that engagement arises when learning resonates with the learner's interests, emotions, and context.[60] MATATAG includes values education and life skills, aiming to connect learning with personal and social

54 Department of Education, "Performance Task Guidelines," 2023.

55 Gloria G. Salandanan, Teacher Education: Principles and Strategies (Quezon City: Lorimar Publishing, 2011).

56 Dewey, Experience and Education, 25.

57 Department of Education, "School-Based Management Policy Guidelines," 2023.

58 Fra Andrew Maria, "Empowering Learning: Dewey's Pragmatic Approach as a Scaffold for the MATATAG Curriculum," Prezi, November 17, 2024.

59 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 209.

60 Ibid., 210.

relevance. However, the curriculum's breadth, especially in early grades, can lead to superficial coverage rather than deep engagement.[61] Teachers report difficulty in balancing cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains within limited instructional time.

Moreover, engagement requires emotional safety and relational trust. Dewey emphasized that students must feel valued and heard.[62] In overcrowded classrooms with rigid pacing guides, opportunities for dialogue and reflection are often sacrificed. The curriculum's design must prioritize depth over density if meaningful engagement is to be realized.

5. Relevance to Present Life vs. Vocational Framing

Dewey argued that education must prepare students to navigate present realities—not just future employment.[63] MATATAG's goal of producing "job-ready" citizens reflects a utilitarian orientation. While employability is important, Dewey cautioned against reducing education to economic function. He believed that relevance includes ethical reasoning, civic participation, and personal growth.

The curriculum's integration of "makabansa" competencies and values education, as outlined in the Values Education Framework, gestures toward broader relevance beyond employability by incorporating civic and ethical dimensions of learning.[64] Yet it's framing often privileges vocational outcomes over democratic formation. Dewey would challenge this imbalance, urging educators to ask: Are we preparing students to live well, or merely to work well?

6. Adaptability vs. Bureaucratic Inertia

Adaptability is central to Dewey's vision of education in a changing world. He believed that learners must develop habits of flexibility, reflection, and innovation.[65] MATATAG includes provisions for curriculum review and school-based adaptation. However, bureaucratic processes and hierarchical decision-making often slow responsiveness.[66] Teachers report limited influence over curriculum design, and innovation is sometimes discouraged in favor of compliance.

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61 Department of Education, "MATATAG Curriculum Implementation Timeline," 2023.

62 Dewey, Experience and Education, 38.

63 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 203–204.

64 Department of Education, "Values Education Framework," 2023.

65 Dewey, Experience and Education, 65.

66 Michael Fullan, The New Meaning of Educational Change, 4th ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007), 35–36.

Dewey's principle of adaptability demands a culture of continuous learning, not just for students, but for institutions. MATATAG's potential lies in its capacity to evolve, but this requires decentralization, trust, and professional agency.

F. Comparative Philosophical Insights and Synthesis

The philosophical tensions between Dewey's educational principles and the MATATAG Curriculum are not unique to the Philippines. Globally, curriculum reforms often struggle to balance progressive ideals with institutional constraints. Dewey's influence can be traced across systems that have embraced experiential learning, democratic participation, and holistic development—yet even these models face challenges in translating philosophy into practice.

Comparative Insights: Dewey's Legacy in Global Reform

In Finland, for example, the national curriculum emphasizes phenomenon-based learning, student agency, and interdisciplinary integration.[67] These features reflect Dewey's principles of free activity, experience-based learning, and adaptability. Finnish schools prioritize teacher autonomy and trust, allowing educators to design learning experiences that respond to student interests and local contexts.[68] This decentralization supports Dewey's vision of schools as laboratories of democracy.

Singapore's education system, while more centralized, has also integrated Deweyan elements through its "Teach Less, Learn More" initiative.[69] This reform encourages inquiry-based learning, critical thinking, and values education. However, scholars note that the pressure of high-stakes exams continues to limit pedagogical freedom.[70] The Singaporean case illustrates the difficulty of sustaining philosophical reform within competitive, performance-driven environments.

In contrast, the United States, Dewey's own context, has seen fluctuating commitment to his ideals. While progressive education movements have gained traction, they are often overshadowed by standardized testing and market-

67 Finnish National Agency for Education, "National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014," Helsinki, 2016.

68 Pasi Sahlberg, Finnish Lessons 2.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland? (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015).

69 Ministry of Education Singapore, "Teach Less, Learn More," accessed October 31, 2025.

70 David Hogan, "Education Policy in Singapore: A Balancing Act," Asia Pacific Journal of Education 32, no. 2 (2012): 153–170.

oriented policies.[71] Dewey's legacy remains contested, with educators and policymakers debating the role of schools in cultivating democratic citizenship versus economic productivity.

These comparative cases offer valuable lessons for the Philippines. First, philosophical coherence must be matched by structural support. Deweyan principles thrive when teachers are trusted, trained, and empowered. Second, curriculum must be flexible enough to adapt to local realities while maintaining national vision. Third, assessment systems must evolve to capture growth, reflection, and ethical reasoning—not just content mastery.

Philosophical Synthesis: Toward a Deweyan MATATAG

To fully embody Dewey's educational philosophy, the MATATAG Curriculum must move beyond managerial reform and embrace education as a moral, experiential, and democratic endeavor. This requires a reimagining of curriculum design, pedagogy, and institutional culture.

Curriculum Design. Dewey would advocate for thematic, integrated units that connect disciplines through real-world problems.[72] MATATAG can incorporate this by encouraging cross-curricular projects, community-based learning, and student-led inquiries. Local history, environmental issues, and civic challenges can serve as anchors for interdisciplinary exploration.

Pedagogy. Teachers must be facilitators of inquiry, not mere implementers of content. Professional development should focus on reflective practice, dialogic teaching, and ethical reasoning.[73] Dewey emphasized that teaching is an art grounded in human relationships. MATATAG must invest in building pedagogical capacity that honors this complexity.

Assessment. Dewey rejected rote testing in favor of formative evaluation that captures growth and engagement.[74] MATATAG can adopt portfolio assessments, performance tasks, and student reflections to complement standardized measures. These tools allow for deeper insight into student learning and foster metacognitive awareness.

Institutional Culture. Schools must become communities of inquiry where students and teachers co-construct knowledge. Dewey envisioned

71 Diane Ravitch, The Death and Life of the Great American School System (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

72 John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 203–204.

73 Dewey, Experience and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 60.

74 Ibid., 38.

education as a social process rooted in communication and collaboration.[75] MATATAG's implementation must cultivate trust, dialogue, and shared responsibility, moving beyond compliance toward co-ownership.

Ethical and Civic Formation. Dewey's ultimate goal was to prepare individuals for democratic life. This requires education that nurtures empathy, critical consciousness, and civic agency.[76] MATATAG's "Makabansa" strand offers a starting point, but it must be deepened through participatory governance, service learning, and ethical discourse.

In synthesizing Dewey's philosophy with MATATAG's aspirations, the challenge is not merely technical but conceptual. Reform must, therefore, be guided by a clear educational vision, one that sees students not as future workers but as present citizens, capable of shaping their communities and reflecting on their place in the world.

This shift in vision requires a redefinition of educational success. Dewey rejected narrow metrics of achievement, arguing instead for growth as the central aim of education.[77] Growth, in Dewey's terms, is not merely academic progression but the expansion of experience, judgment, and ethical awareness. MATATAG must therefore resist the temptation to equate success with test scores or job readiness alone. It must embrace a broader conception of learning, one that includes empathy, creativity, and civic agency.

Such a vision also demands a reimagining of the learner. Dewey saw the child not as a passive vessel but as a dynamic, meaning-making agent.[78] This view challenges hierarchical models of schooling that position teachers as authorities and students as recipients. Instead, it calls for dialogic pedagogy, where knowledge is co-constructed through inquiry and reflection. MATATAG's implementation must cultivate this relational ethos, empowering students to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and engage in collective problem-solving.

Moreover, Dewey's philosophy insists that education is inseparable from democracy.[79] Schools are not neutral spaces; they are arenas where values are formed, identities negotiated, and futures imagined. In the Philippine context,

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75 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 87–88.

76 Dewey, Experience and Education, 65.

77 John Dewey, Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 60.

78 John Dewey, Experience and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 25.

79 John Dewey, "Education and Social Change," The Social Frontier 3, no. 25 (1937): 317–319. Reprinted in The Later Works of John Dewey, vol. 11, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).

where social inequality and political polarization persist, education must serve as a counterforce, fostering critical consciousness, solidarity, and ethical discernment. MATATAG's "Makabansa" strand offers a foundation, but must expand into a lived curriculum of civic engagement.

This entails embedding democratic practices into the fabric of school life. Student councils, classroom deliberations, community partnerships, and participatory governance are not extracurricular, they are essential expressions of Deweyan education.[80] They teach students how to listen, reason out, compromise, and act with integrity. MATATAG must institutionalize these practices, ensuring that democracy is not just taught but enacted.

Finally, Dewey's emphasis on adaptability speaks directly to the challenges of the 21st century. Climate change, digital disruption, and global uncertainty demand learners who are resilient, reflective, and ethically grounded.[81] MATATAG must prepare students not just to cope with change but to shape it. This requires curriculum that is interdisciplinary, future-oriented, and anchored in real-world dilemmas. It also requires teachers who model lifelong learning and ethical leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the MATATAG Curriculum through the philosophical lens of John Dewey, not merely to identify alignment, but to critically assess the nature and depth of that alignment. The findings indicate that while Deweyan principles are indeed present within the curriculum's policy discourse, particularly in its emphasis on contextualization, holistic development, and learner-centeredness. It was evident that these principles are not uniformly or fully realized in practice. Rather, they appear in varying degrees, at times functioning as guiding ideals, and at other times remaining aspirational or only partially operationalized.

The MATATAG Curriculum articulates reformist goals that resonate with Deweyan ideals: contextualized instruction, inclusive education, holistic development, and teacher empowerment. Its emphasis on foundational skills and values education reflects a partial philosophical alignment with Dewey's vision of education as a moral and civic enterprise. However, the curriculum's implementation reveals persistent challenges. Standardization, resource

80 John Dewey, Democracy and Education, 87–88.

81 Michael Fullan, The New Meaning of Educational Change, 4th ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007), 35–36.

disparities, rigid assessment practices, and bureaucratic inertia continue to constrain the realization of progressive pedagogy.

Dewey's philosophy reminds us that education is not a technical endeavor but a deeply human one. It is a process of growth, inquiry, and ethical formation. The MATATAG Curriculum, while promising in its intent, must deepen its philosophical coherence and operational flexibility to truly transform Philippine education. Reform must move beyond managerial efficiency and embrace education as a lived experience, one that empowers learners to reflect, engage, and act within their communities.

This critique also situates MATATAG within a global context, drawing insights from systems that have attempted to integrate Deweyan principles. Comparative cases from Finland, Singapore, and the United States illustrate that philosophical reform requires structural support, pedagogical trust, and cultural responsiveness. The Philippine experience adds to this discourse by highlighting the importance of localized adaptation, democratic participation, and ethical grounding.

Finally, the study affirms that curriculum reform is not merely a matter of policy, it is a philosophical commitment to the kind of society we wish to build. Dewey's framework offers a compass for this journey, guiding educators, policymakers, and communities toward a vision of education that is experiential, democratic, and transformative. The MATATAG Curriculum stands at a crossroads: it can either replicate the limitations of past reforms or become a catalyst for genuine educational renewal. The path forward depends on our willingness to engage not only with systems, but with ideas, and to let philosophy shape practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To translate the philosophical insights of Dewey into actionable reform within the MATATAG Curriculum, a series of strategic and pedagogical shifts must be undertaken. These recommendations are not merely technical adjustments but conceptual realignments that foreground education as a moral, experiential, and democratic process. Each recommendation builds upon the critique established in the preceding sections and aims to bridge the gap between philosophical aspiration and institutional practice.

1. **The Department of Education must embed Deweyan principles explicitly into the design and documentation of the MATATAG Curriculum.** While current policy gestures toward learner-centeredness and contextualization, the philosophical foundations

remain implicit. Dewey's six principles, individuality, free activity, experience-based learning, meaningful engagement, relevance to present life, and adaptability, should be clearly articulated in curriculum guides, teacher manuals, and instructional frameworks. This will enable educators to understand not only the content and competencies they are expected to deliver, but the deeper ethical and epistemological purposes that underpin them.

2. **Teacher agency must be strengthened through sustained, reflective, and localized professional development.** Dewey viewed teachers as facilitators of inquiry and ethical reasoning, not mere implementers of standardized content. To realize this vision, professional development programs should prioritize dialogic pedagogy, inquiry-based learning, and values integration. These programs must be responsive to local contexts and designed to foster collaborative curriculum planning, reflective practice, and pedagogical innovation. Without empowered educators who understand and embody Deweyan principles, philosophical reform cannot take root in the classroom.

3. **The assessment framework of MATATAG must evolve to include formative and reflective tools that capture student growth, creativity, and ethical engagement.** Dewey rejected rote testing and emphasized evaluation as a process of understanding how learners construct meaning. This means that the Department of Education should complement standardized assessments with portfolios, performance tasks, student journals, and peer evaluations. These alternative tools allow for deeper insight into student thinking and foster metacognitive awareness. They also support a more humane and democratic approach to assessment, one that values process over product and reflection over recall.

4. **Infrastructure for experiential learning must be prioritized to operationalize Dewey's principle of education through experience.** Schools must be equipped with access to laboratories, libraries, digital tools, and flexible learning spaces. More importantly, partnerships with local communities should be cultivated to support fieldwork, service learning, and real-world problem-solving. Equity in resource distribution must be ensured so that experiential learning is not limited to well-funded schools. Dewey's vision of education as a reconstruction of experience demands that students engage with their environments in meaningful and transformative ways.

5. **Democratic practices must be institutionalized within school governance and classroom culture.** Dewey insisted that education is inseparable from democracy and that schools must serve as laboratories of civic life. MATATAG's "Makabansa" strand should expand into a whole-school approach to civic engagement. This includes student councils with real decision-making power, classroom deliberations on social issues, and community-based projects that foster ethical reasoning and collective action. These practices must be embedded not as extracurricular activities but as core expressions of democratic education.

6. **Curriculum integration and thematic learning should be promoted to foster relevance, engagement, and holistic understanding.** Dewey advocated for interdisciplinary approaches that connect learning to real-world contexts. The Department of Education should encourage thematic units that bridge subjects around pressing societal issues—such as climate change, local history, and digital citizenship. This approach supports deeper learning and allows students to see the interconnectedness of knowledge, values, and action.

7. **Feedback loops between policy and practice must be established to ensure that curriculum reform remains responsive, democratic, and grounded in lived experience.** Teachers, students, and communities must be invited to participate in curriculum evaluation and revision. Mechanisms for gathering feedback, sharing innovations, and addressing contextual challenges should be institutionalized. Dewey's philosophy demands that education be a dynamic and participatory process—not a static set of directives handed down from above.

These recommendations, taken together, offer a pathway for transforming the MATATAG Curriculum into a truly Deweyan model of education, one that honors individuality, fosters inquiry, cultivates ethical reasoning, and prepares learners not only for the future but for meaningful participation in the present. Reform must be philosophical, not just procedural, and must be guided by a vision of education as a force for democratic life and human flourishing.

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