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A Comparative Analysis of the Educational Systems of Finland and the Philippines

Cherry Ann G Carranza [1*], Wilma M King [2]
[1-2] President Ramon Magsaysay State University (Formerly Ramon Magsaysay Technological University), Iba, Zambales, Philippines

* Corresponding Author: **Cherry Ann G Carranza**

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Abstract
This study presents a comparative analysis of the educational systems of Finland and the Philippines, focusing on their historical development, educational philosophies, curriculum structures, school-year duration, medium of instruction, grading and assessment systems, teacher preparation, school governance, and student support services. The study aims to identify effective educational practices in Finland that may provide relevant and practical lessons for improving Philippine education. A qualitative descriptive-comparative research design was employed through documentary analysis of official education policies, government publications, national curriculum guidelines, legislation, and international assessment reports. The findings reveal that both countries recognize education as essential to national development, social equity, and individual growth. However, they differ in curriculum implementation, educational governance, teacher qualifications, assessment practices, and the provision of student welfare services. Finland emphasizes teacher professionalism, local curriculum development, formative assessment, and comprehensive learner support, while the Philippines continues to strengthen its K to 12 program and implement the MATATAG Curriculum to address learning gaps and educational inequalities. The PISA 2022 results further indicate considerable differences in learning outcomes between the two countries. The study concludes that Finland offers valuable insights for Philippine educational reform, particularly in teacher development, learner-centered instruction, school autonomy, foundational literacy and numeracy, and integrated student support. However, adopting foreign educational practices requires careful consideration of the Philippines' socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, and institutional conditions. The study recommends context-sensitive educational reforms to promote inclusive, equitable, and quality education.

Keywords: Comparative Education, Educational System, Finland, Philippines, Curriculum Development, K to 12 Program, MATATAG Curriculum

Introduction

Background of the Study

Education is essential to national development because it develops knowledge, skills, values, and the capacity of individuals to participate in society. Although countries share this broad purpose, educational systems differ according to history, culture, economic resources, governance, and public priorities. Comparative education makes it possible to examine these differences and determine which policies and practices may offer relevant lessons for another country.

Finland and the Philippines provide a meaningful comparison. Finland is widely discussed for its commitment to educational equity, professional teacher preparation, strong student support services, and locally adapted implementation of a national core curriculum. The Philippines similarly recognizes education as a fundamental right and has pursued major reforms through the K to 12 program and the MATATAG Curriculum. However, the two countries operate in different demographic, geographic, and economic conditions.

Finland provides nine years of primary and lower secondary education, preceded by pre-primary education and followed by general or vocational upper secondary education. The Philippines offers one year of kindergarten, six years of elementary school, four years of junior high school, and two years of senior high school. These structures reflect differing policy histories and approaches to preparing learners for higher education, work, and citizenship (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], n.d.-a; Republic Act No. 10533, 2013) [7].

The Finnish national core curriculum establishes common goals while municipalities and schools prepare local curricula. It includes subject knowledge, transversal competencies, and multidisciplinary learning modules. In the Philippines, curriculum standards are established at the national level by the Department of Education (DepEd), while schools contextualize lessons for their learners. Implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum began in phases in school year 2024–2025 (EDUFI, n.d.-b; DepEd, 2024) [1].

Comparing these systems is useful, but it is important not to portray either one as flawless. The OECD PISA 2022 findings showed that Finland remained above the OECD average in mathematics, reading, and science, although its performance declined over time. The Philippines continued to face substantial learning challenges. Such results point to differences in educational outcomes but do not, by themselves, prove that one particular teaching practice causes higher achievement (OECD, 2023a, 2023b) [5].

This study therefore examines the historical background, educational structure, curriculum, school-year duration, medium of instruction, grading system, and selected teaching and school-management practices of Finland and the Philippines. Its purpose is to identify appropriate, feasible lessons for Philippine education without assuming that a policy effective in one country can be transferred unchanged to another.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe and compare the educational systems of Finland and the Philippines. Specifically, it aims to examine the following dimensions:

1. Historical development and philosophy of education
2. Curriculum and structure of basic education
3. Length and organization of the school year
4. Medium of instruction
5. Grading and assessment system
6. Teacher preparation, school governance, and student support
7. Practices that may be appropriately adapted to Philippine education

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive-comparative research design through documentary analysis. It draws on published legislation, official education-agency explanations, national curriculum guidance, and international assessment reports. Finland and the Philippines are described separately, compared across selected dimensions, and interpreted in relation to local educational conditions. No interviews, school observations, surveys, or experimental procedures were conducted; therefore, the findings represent an analysis of secondary documents rather than newly collected field data.

The primary sources consulted include materials published by the Finnish National Agency for Education, the Philippine Department of Education, Philippine legislation on basic education, and OECD PISA 2022 country reports. The discussion distinguishes established system features from recommendations proposed by the researcher.

Findings

A. History of the Educational Systems

Philippine Educational System

Philippine education developed through precolonial community-based learning, Spanish colonial religious schooling, the expansion of public instruction during the American period, and changes after independence. The establishment of a national public education system, the use of English in formal instruction, and later efforts to strengthen Filipino and other Philippine languages shaped the modern system. The 1987 Constitution recognizes the right of all citizens to quality education and directs the State to make education accessible.

Republic Act No. 10533 established the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 and institutionalized the K to 12 basic education structure. More recently, DepEd has undertaken curriculum revisions under MATATAG, emphasizing foundational skills and a more manageable set of learning competencies. These reforms address persistent concerns about learning achievement, curriculum congestion, and unequal access to school resources (Republic Act No. 10533, 2013; DepEd, 2024) [1, 7].

Finnish Educational System

Finland gradually developed a comprehensive, publicly supported school system in the twentieth century. A major reform introduced the comprehensive school (peruskoulu) in the 1970s, replacing earlier pathways that separated pupils at a relatively young age. This change reflected a national emphasis on extending educational opportunity across social and geographic groups. Subsequent reforms strengthened teacher education, local responsibility, and inclusive support arrangements.

Today, education policy combines national legislative and curricular frameworks with considerable implementation responsibilities for municipalities and education providers. Compulsory education extends from age six through age eighteen, ordinarily encompassing pre-primary, nine years of primary and lower secondary schooling, and upper secondary education. Finland promotes both general and vocational pathways after basic education (EDUFI, n.d.-a).

Ideology of Education

Finland emphasizes equity, lifelong learning, student well-being, and the responsibility of schools to support each learner. Teachers are expected to use professional judgment within national curriculum goals. The Philippines emphasizes inclusive and quality education, national development, cultural identity, and the development of competent and values-oriented citizens. Both countries aim to serve diverse learners, but their available resources and policy approaches differ. Differences in scale, geography, socioeconomic conditions, and teacher workload must be considered in evaluating possible policy transfers.

B. Curriculum

Philippines

Under the K to 12 structure, basic education consists of kindergarten; elementary Grades 1–6; junior high school Grades 7–10; and senior high school Grades 11–12. DepEd sets learning standards and implements national curriculum policy, with curricular changes introduced by phase rather than uniformly across all grade levels at once. Curriculum areas include language, mathematics, science, social studies, values education, and other age-appropriate learning areas. The curriculum also provides opportunities for contextualization to students' local experiences (DepEd, 2024) [1].

Finland

Finnish primary and lower secondary education forms a nine-year comprehensive stage. The national core curriculum identifies subjects and broad competencies while municipalities and schools prepare local curricula. Core subjects include mother tongue and literature, national and foreign languages, mathematics, environmental and natural sciences, history, social studies, arts, physical education, and other areas. Multidisciplinary learning modules connect knowledge across subjects, and students participate in planning these modules (EDUFI, n.d.-b).

The Finnish model does not eliminate individual school subjects. Rather, it supports interdisciplinary work alongside subject instruction. A relevant comparison for the Philippines is how local curriculum flexibility can be balanced with clear national learning goals and strong teacher support.

1. Structure and Educational Levels

Finland: pre-primary education is ordinarily undertaken at age six; primary and lower secondary education covers Grades 1–9, generally beginning at age seven; and learners proceed to general or vocational upper secondary education. Higher education is offered by universities and universities of applied sciences. The Philippines: kindergarten begins at about age five, followed by six years of elementary, four years of junior high, and two years of senior high school. Higher and technical-vocational education are overseen through distinct national institutions.

2. School Year Duration

Finland: the basic education school year ordinarily begins in August and ends in late May or early June, with 190 statutory school working days before adjustments for relevant public holidays. Municipalities establish the detailed calendar within national requirements. Philippines: the annual school calendar and minimum class-day requirements are governed by law and DepEd issuances; opening and closing dates may vary by school year. For a fair comparison, the Philippine calendar should be identified by the specific school year rather than treated as a permanently fixed set of dates.

3. Medium of Instruction

Finland: instruction is principally available in Finnish or Swedish, the country's national languages. Education may also be organized in Sámi and other languages in applicable circumstances, according to national rules and local provision. Students learn additional languages in school. Philippines: Filipino and English are central languages of instruction, subject to national and grade-level policy. Philippine languages also play an important role in language development and contextualized teaching. The country's linguistic diversity presents different implementation demands from those faced by Finland.

4. Grading System and Assessment

Finland: teachers assess students through ongoing formative assessment and summative evaluation. There are no nationwide standardized examinations for pupils in the nine-year comprehensive stage. Teachers use classroom evidence such as tasks, examinations, and participation, and provide regular feedback. Numerical grades on Finland's basic education scale range from 4 (failed) to 10 (excellent), with national criteria guiding assessment at key stages (EDUFI, n.d.-b, n.d.-c).

Philippines: DepEd uses classroom-based formative and summative assessment according to applicable grade-level policy. Performance tasks, written work, and other evidence of learning have formed part of the grading framework. Because assessment policies are subject to updates, teachers must follow the DepEd orders effective for their specific school year and grade level. The relevant comparison is the balance between feedback for learning and grading for reporting, rather than a claim that Finland has no examinations or that Philippine schools rely entirely on tests.

5. Teacher Preparation and School Administration

Finnish classroom and subject teachers are ordinarily required to complete advanced university-based teacher education, generally including a master's degree and pedagogical preparation. Finnish municipalities and schools have significant responsibilities for delivering education within national frameworks. In the Philippines, teachers typically prepare through undergraduate teacher-education programs and must meet professional licensure requirements; DepEd governs public basic education nationally through its offices and field units. Professional development opportunities exist in both systems, but vary in scale and access.

6. Student Support and Equity

Finland provides extensive support in basic education, including free school meals and other statutory pupil welfare provisions. Support for learning and school participation is integrated into public education policy. The Philippines operates multiple support and inclusion programs but faces considerable differences between areas in infrastructure, staffing, connectivity, and service access. Finnish support arrangements may inspire Philippine policy, yet full replication would require sustained public investment and local capacity.

Result

The documentary analysis identifies similarities in the public goals of Finland and the Philippines and differences in curriculum governance, structure, student assessment, language environment, and support systems. Table 1 summarizes the main findings.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of the Educational Systems of Finland and the Philippines

Dimension	Finland	Philippines
Basic education structure	Pre-primary at age 6; nine-year comprehensive primary/lower secondary; general or vocational upper secondary	Kindergarten; Grades 1–6 elementary; Grades 7–10 junior high; Grades 11–12 senior high
Curriculum	National core curriculum plus municipal/school curricula; transversal competencies and interdisciplinary modules	DepEd national K to 12 framework and phased MATATAG implementation; contextualized instruction
School year	Generally August to late May/early June; approximately 190 statutory school days	DepEd calendar and applicable school-year guidelines; dates depend on school year
Medium of instruction	Mainly Finnish or Swedish, with provision for other languages in specific contexts	Filipino and English under applicable language policy; Philippine languages support learning
Assessment	Teacher-led formative and summative assessment; numerical 4–10 scale at designated stages; no national comprehensive-school tests	Formative and summative classroom assessment under prevailing DepEd policy
Teacher preparation	University-based preparation, generally through master's-level qualifications	Teacher-education degree, professional licensure, and professional development
Governance	National standards with substantial municipal and school responsibility	National DepEd policy administered through central, regional, division, and school levels
Student support	Comprehensive public services, including free school meals and learning support	Targeted education, inclusion, and learner-support programs; uneven local resourcing
Educational challenges	Declining PISA trends and widening learning inequalities	Low measured learning outcomes and gaps in resources and access

Analysis of Results

Structure of Education

Both systems provide pathways from compulsory schooling to upper secondary and tertiary learning, but they group grade levels differently. Finland uses a single comprehensive nine-year stage, while the Philippines separates elementary school from junior and senior high school. Neither arrangement is inherently sufficient to guarantee better learning; the quality of teaching, continuity, student support, and resources also matter.

Curriculum and Teaching Practices

Both countries maintain national curriculum goals, but Finland explicitly combines its national core curriculum with municipally and school-developed local curricula and multidisciplinary learning modules. The Philippines emphasizes nationally specified competencies and school-level contextualization. Philippine educators may consider using more intentional cross-subject projects, provided these are aligned with standards and feasible within existing class conditions.

Assessment and Learner Development

Finland places substantial responsibility on teachers for formative and summative assessment during comprehensive schooling. The Philippines likewise recognizes formative assessment but also uses national reporting and accountability structures. Strengthening useful feedback, diagnostic support, and consistent assessment literacy is a practical direction for Philippine schools. The two grading scales should not be treated as directly interchangeable.

Learning Outcomes and Educational Challenges

PISA 2022 reported Finland's mean scores as 484 in mathematics, 490 in reading, and 511 in science; the Philippine scores were 355, 347, and 356, respectively (OECD, 2023a, 2023b) [5]. These are scores for sampled 15-year-old learners, not marks assigned by schools. The outcome differences justify closer examination of learning environments, but they cannot identify one single cause. Finland also experienced long-term performance declines, illustrating the importance of ongoing system improvement.

Discussion

The comparison indicates that the educational systems of Finland and the Philippines share broad commitments to equitable access, personal development, and national progress. However, their specific arrangements reflect their distinctive histories and contexts. Finland developed a comprehensive school model supported by municipal delivery, teacher professional preparation, and extensive learner welfare services. The Philippines has pursued broad access through K to 12 and curriculum reform while addressing the challenges of a larger, geographically dispersed, and linguistically diverse learner population.

A key difference concerns the degree of curricular discretion exercised at local levels. Finland's national core curriculum is designed to be developed into locally specific curricula, whereas Philippine schools work within more centrally prescribed competencies and administrative structures. The Finnish approach suggests the value of meaningful school-level planning, but such flexibility would need accompanying support, development time, and safeguards for consistent learning standards.

A second important observation concerns assessment. In Finland's comprehensive schools, teachers conduct ongoing assessments and use feedback to guide learning. Philippine policy also recognizes formative assessment, making this an area of possible strengthening rather than a completely new practice. More consistent use of diagnostic evidence, actionable feedback, and targeted remediation may be especially relevant to learners struggling in foundational literacy and numeracy.

Third, learner support should be considered a core part of educational quality. Free school meals, school welfare, and additional learning support are integral to Finland's public model. The Philippines can draw lessons from this integrated approach while prioritizing initiatives according to local needs and available funding. The comparison supports gradual, context-sensitive reforms over the direct adoption of another country's entire system.

Conclusion

This descriptive-comparative research found that Finland and the Philippines both recognize education as vital to equality,

individual development, and national progress. They differ in the structure of basic education, curriculum development, teacher preparation, language context, assessment arrangements, and public student support. Finland's approach illustrates how professional trust, school-level planning, and integrated learner services may contribute to a supportive educational environment. Philippine education demonstrates an ongoing commitment to access and curriculum improvement, while facing significant implementation and learning challenges.

Finland should therefore be treated as a useful comparative case, not as a perfect system or a ready-made solution. Its declining PISA trends show that even well-established educational systems require continued reform. The strongest implication for the Philippines is to improve classroom instruction and learner support through evidence-based, locally feasible policies that value teachers' professional knowledge and respond to student needs.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen sustained teacher professional development in formative assessment, inclusive teaching, and research-informed instruction.
2. Provide structured time for teachers to collaborate on interdisciplinary lessons and contextualized learning activities.
3. Prioritize early literacy and numeracy support using regular diagnostic evidence and targeted interventions.
4. Improve access to school-based guidance, nutrition, health, and learning support, especially in underserved communities.
5. Encourage school-level innovations while maintaining clear national competencies, accountability, and equity safeguards.
6. Use international assessments alongside local evidence; avoid interpreting average scores as proof of any single policy's effectiveness.
7. Conduct further research involving teachers, school leaders, and learners before recommending large-scale transfer of Finnish practices.

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