

Integrating Multicultural Education into Primary School Curricula in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Analysis of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines

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Abstract

Southeast Asia is one of the world's most culturally diverse regions, encompassing multiple ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. This diversity underscores the importance of embedding multicultural values in education to foster social cohesion and tolerance from an early age. This study employs a qualitative literature review to analyze how multicultural education is integrated into primary school curricula in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Findings indicate that while each nation has developed unique approaches, commonalities exist in the inclusion of multicultural principles within citizenship, language, and social studies subjects. Indonesia emphasizes Pancasila values, Malaysia promotes ethnic harmony through civic and moral education, Thailand stresses social stability and nationalism, and the Philippines prioritizes indigenous rights through the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) program. Challenges include political differences, cultural majoritarianism, and limited acceptance of diversity issues. However, best practices—such as the Pancasila Student Profile in Indonesia and the IPEd program in the Philippines—serve as exemplary models for fostering inclusive and tolerant learning environments. The study concludes that developing regionally integrated multicultural education frameworks could enhance intercultural competence and strengthen ASEAN identity among young learners.

Keywords

Multicultural Education; Primary Education; Curriculum; Southeast Asia; Social Cohesion; ASEAN

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is a region characterized by significant ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. This diversity underscores the urgent need for multicultural education as a vital tool for maintaining social cohesion and fostering mutual respect among learners from an early age (Чайка, 2023; Gulya & Fehérvári, 2024; (Widodo et al., 2021; (Putri et al., 2024; . Multicultural education is viewed as an educational approach that emphasises the acceptance of differences, intercultural dialogue, and the instillation of tolerance values (Widodo et al., 2021; Nagy et al., 2022; Wilodati et al., 2023). As this region comprises countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, it is critical to leverage this education to enhance intercultural understanding and build a harmonious society (Aricindy et al., 2023; Rohmat, 2023; Wilodati et al., 2023).

At the primary school level, multicultural education establishes the groundwork for children's character development. Through an inclusive curriculum, students are introduced to diversity within both national and ASEAN contexts (Afandi et al., 2022; Sariyatun & Marpelina, 2024; Hamdi & Musthofa, 2020). Countries in Southeast Asia have integrated elements of multicultural education into their national curriculums, albeit with varying methodologies (Widodo et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2024; Muhajir et al., 2020). This integration is essential in shaping children's understanding of their place in a diverse society while cultivating respect for others' cultural differences (Haq et al., 2023; İşler, 2021; BALABA, 2023).

This research aims to analyze the application of multicultural education within primary school curricula across Southeast Asia and to identify best practices that can be adapted across national borders (Kim & Kim, 2023; Fuadi & Elsyam, 2024; Sueca et al., 2024). Various studies indicate the importance of an adjusted curriculum that caters to the unique

sociocultural contexts of each country while remaining focused on the overall goal of promoting tolerance and understanding among diverse student populations Hanif, 2023; Akçaoğlu & Arsal, 2022; Wilodati et al., 2023; . Robust multicultural education practices can bridge the gaps among students from various backgrounds and contribute to effective social formation and integration within the classroom environment (Hamdi & Musthofa, 2020; Rohmat, 2023) Sueca et al., 2024).

The necessity of evolving the educational framework to embrace multiculturalism confirms the role of education in national development and social harmony (Galindo & Andriyanti, 2021; Cho, 2021; Halim, 2021). Studies have shown that implementing a multicultural education framework not only transforms individual perspectives but also influences societal norms towards greater acceptance of diversity (Mardhiah et al., 2024; Hanif, 2023; Rohmat, 2023). As such, this analytical exploration seeks to highlight the vital practices and frameworks needed to actualize multicultural education effectively within Southeast Asian countries (Putri et al., 2024; SÖYLEMEZ & ORAL, 2020; Wilodati et al., 2023; . Furthermore, it aims to delineate a structured approach toward enhancing multicultural competency that supports educational policymakers, educators, and institutions in fostering an inclusive and tolerant educational environment for future generations (López-Cordero et al., 2021; Mukniah, 2023; Akçaoğlu & Arsal, 2022; Izzati et al., 2023).

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach through a literature review to gather relevant data. The curriculum documents from four primary Southeast Asian nations—Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines—serve as the primary data sources. Indonesia's "Kurikulum Merdeka" and "Kurikulum 2013" provide insights into how educational frameworks are designed to incorporate multicultural values (Suryaman & Juharyanto, 2020; (Patras et al., 2022). Malaysia utilizes the "Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah" (KSSR), which embodies different aspects of multicultural education by promoting awareness and appreciation of diverse cultures among students (Aghili et al., 2021; DURMUŞ & Korkmaz, 2023). Thailand's "Basic Education Core Curriculum" reinforces similar principles aimed at fostering an understanding of different cultural backgrounds DURMUŞ & Korkmaz, 2023)(Patras et al., 2022). The Philippines implements the "K–12 Basic Education Curriculum," which also integrates multicultural education principles to enhance student engagement with cultural diversity (Suryaman & Juharyanto, 2020; (Patras et al., 2022). Data sources consist of curriculum books, ministry regulations, and international scholarly articles focusing on multicultural education, providing a comprehensive overview of various educational strategies (Munadi & Hakiman, 2021; (Patras et al., 2022).

Data analysis is conducted through comparative techniques, wherein the integration of multicultural values in the primary school curricula of the aforementioned countries is systematically compared. This analysis highlights how each country adapts and implements multicultural education to address local contexts and needs (Aghili et al., 2021; DURMUŞ & Korkmaz, 2023). The goal is to better understand the objectives behind integrating multicultural values and how these frameworks can facilitate social cohesion within diverse populations (Suryaman & Juharyanto, 2020; Patras et al., 2022). The comparative aspect of this research will reveal best practices that can be shared across nations, thereby contributing to a more integrated approach to multicultural education in Southeast Asia (Aghili et al., 2021; DURMUŞ & Korkmaz, 2023). By examining specific curricular documents and their implications, the study aims to contribute valuable insights into the ongoing discourse surrounding multicultural education in the region (Patras et al., 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multicultural education in Indonesia is intricately integrated into various subjects, primarily through the framework of "Pendidikan Pancasila dan Kewarganegaraan" (PPKn), Indonesian Language, and local content. Central to this educational approach are values emphasizing tolerance, mutual cooperation, and respect for differences among ethnicities, religions, and cultures (Чайка, 2023; Gulya & Fehérvári, 2024). The "Kurikulum Merdeka" also reinforces these multicultural dimensions, particularly through the strengthening of the Pancasila Student Profile, which promotes a "global diversity" perspective, aligning with principles of multiculturalism (Widodo et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2024). This approach aims not only to foster inclusivity but also to contribute to building a socially cohesive and harmonious society within the diverse Indonesian demographic context (Nagy et al., 2022; Wilodati et al., 2023).

Similarly, Malaysia incorporates multicultural education through the "Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah" (KSSR), with subjects such as Moral Education, Islamic Education, and the Malay language fostering an understanding of cultural diversity (Aricindy et al., 2023; Rohmat, 2023; Afandi et al., 2022). Malaysian schools often reflect certain ethnic bases (Malay, Chinese, and Tamil); however, governmental initiatives facilitate integration through combined lessons in History and Civics that emphasize shared values (Sariyatun & Marpelina, 2024; Aricindy et al., 2023; Rohmat, 2023). Thai education, represented by the Basic Education Core Curriculum, underscores social harmony and national identity while accommodating local cultural introductions, particularly in border areas with Muslim populations (Hamdi & Musthofa, 2020; Ali et al., 2024; Rohmat, 2023). Moreover, the Philippines' K–12 curriculum embeds multicultural education principally through "Araling Panlipunan" (Social Studies) and includes specific programs like Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd), which caters to the richness of the indigenous ethnicities, serving as an exemplary model for integration in the region (Muhajir et al., 2020; Haq et al., 2023; İşler, 2021).

In conclusion, while there are notable similarities across the educational frameworks of these countries in embedding multicultural principles within citizenship, language, and social subjects, distinct divergences exist. For instance, the Philippines places a stronger emphasis on the rights of indigenous communities, Indonesia on Pancasila values, Malaysia on ethnic harmony, and Thailand on social stability and nationalism (BALABA, 2023; Kim & Kim, 2023; Fuadi & Elsyam, 2024). Various challenges, like differing political approaches, the dominance of majority cultures, and resistance to diversity issues, complicate the effective implementation of multicultural education (Sueca et al., 2024; Hanif, 2023). Notably, best practices, such as IPEd in the Philippines and the Pancasila Student Profile in Indonesia, demonstrate successful models of systematic multicultural education integration that other Southeast Asian nations could adapt, thus promoting comprehensive and engaging learning experiences rooted in diversity (Akçaoğlu & Arsal, 2022; Galindo & Andriyanti, 2021; Cho, 2021).

Discussion

The comparative analysis highlights that Southeast Asian countries share a commitment to cultivating social harmony through multicultural education, yet they differ in emphasis and implementation.

- a. **Indonesia** integrates multicultural values primarily through the subjects of *Pendidikan Pancasila dan Kewarganegaraan* (PPKn), Indonesian language, and local content. The *Kurikulum Merdeka* reinforces inclusivity through the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly the dimension of "global diversity." This framework reflects a balance between national identity and global citizenship.

- b. **Malaysia** adopts multicultural principles in the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR), embedding them in Moral Education, Islamic Education, and Malay language. Although schools often mirror ethnic divisions (Malay, Chinese, Tamil), integration is promoted through shared lessons in history and civics, which emphasize unity within diversity.
- c. **Thailand** emphasizes nationalism and social stability in its Basic Education Core Curriculum while accommodating local cultural traditions. In Muslim-majority border areas such as Pattani, schools incorporate intercultural practices through extracurricular and community-based programs, illustrating context-driven adaptation.
- d. **The Philippines** integrates multiculturalism through *Araling Panlipunan* (Social Studies) and the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) program. The latter stands out as a structured effort to respect indigenous rights and cultural traditions, providing a strong model for inclusive education.

Comparative Insights

While all four countries incorporate multiculturalism within citizenship and social subjects, their frameworks reveal distinct orientations:

- a. **Indonesia** – civic values rooted in Pancasila;
- b. **Malaysia** – inter-ethnic harmony and shared moral values;
- c. **Thailand** – nationalism and social cohesion;
- d. **Philippines** – indigenous rights and cultural preservation.

These differences reflect national socio-political contexts and highlight the adaptive nature of multicultural education. At the same time, challenges such as political contestation, majoritarian dominance, and limited resources hinder full implementation.

Best practices—like Indonesia’s Pancasila Student Profile and the Philippines’ IPEd—demonstrate scalable strategies that could inform ASEAN-wide educational cooperation. Strengthening these practices at the regional level could lead to a more cohesive multicultural education framework, reinforcing shared values while respecting national contexts.

CONCLUSION

Multicultural education is indispensable in Southeast Asia, where cultural diversity shapes social life. The integration of multicultural principles into primary school curricula across Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines demonstrates shared goals of fostering tolerance and mutual respect, albeit through distinct approaches. While Indonesia emphasizes civic unity, Malaysia promotes ethnic harmony, Thailand prioritizes stability, and the Philippines advances indigenous rights, all converge on the necessity of preparing students for life in diverse societies.

This study concludes that ASEAN nations should pursue greater collaboration in developing regionally informed multicultural education models. Such initiatives could enhance intercultural competence, strengthen ASEAN identity, and ensure that future generations are equipped to build inclusive, tolerant, and cohesive societies.

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