

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CURRICULUM MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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Abstract:

This study presents a comparative analysis of curriculum management practices in secondary education systems in Indonesia and Malaysia. Employing a qualitative library research approach, it examines the governance structures, leadership roles, teacher readiness, and implementation dynamics in both countries. Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* promotes decentralized and flexible curriculum management, enabling contextual innovation at the school level. In contrast, Malaysia's centralized *KSSM* ensures policy standardization but limits local adaptability. The findings reveal key challenges, including policy-practice gaps, disparities in teacher competence, and constraints in leadership capacity. Through dialogue with contemporary theories such as instructional leadership, teacher agency, and curriculum governance, this study identifies the need for strategic alignment between national policy and school-level implementation. The novelty of this research lies in its regional comparison, offering insights into how educational systems in the Global South manage curriculum reform. It contributes to the discourse on equity, decentralization, and the professionalization of educators in curriculum change.

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini menyajikan analisis komparatif terhadap praktik manajemen kurikulum pada sistem pendidikan menengah di Indonesia dan Malaysia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis kajian pustaka, studi ini mengeksplorasi struktur tata kelola, peran kepemimpinan, kesiapan guru, serta dinamika implementasi kurikulum di kedua negara. *Kurikulum Merdeka* di Indonesia mendorong manajemen kurikulum yang terdesentralisasi dan fleksibel, memungkinkan inovasi kontekstual di tingkat sekolah. Sebaliknya, *KSSM* Malaysia menekankan standarisasi kebijakan nasional yang kuat namun membatasi adaptasi lokal. Temuan menunjukkan adanya tantangan signifikan seperti kesenjangan antara kebijakan dan praktik, disparitas kompetensi guru, serta keterbatasan kapasitas kepemimpinan sekolah. Melalui dialog dengan teori-teori kontemporer seperti kepemimpinan instruksional, agensi guru, dan tata kelola kurikulum, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya keselarasan strategis antara kebijakan nasional dan pelaksanaan di tingkat sekolah. Kebaruan studi ini terletak pada pendekatan perbandingan regional, yang memberikan kontribusi terhadap diskursus global tentang desentralisasi, kesetaraan, dan profesionalisasi pendidik dalam reformasi kurikulum.

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INTRODUCTION

Curriculum management plays a central role in shaping the effectiveness of secondary education by translating national education policies into actionable strategies at the school level (Sullanmaa et al., 2024; Sheyin, 2024). In Southeast Asia, both Indonesia and Malaysia have undergone significant curriculum reforms, Indonesia with the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and Malaysia with the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah* (KSSM). These reforms emphasize student-centered learning, digital literacy, and 21st-century competencies (Emawati et al., 2023). However, the success of these frameworks depends largely on how curriculum management is structured and implemented within diverse school environments.

In practice, both countries face persistent challenges. For instance, a 2023 survey conducted by Indonesia's Ministry of Education reported that only 37% of secondary school teachers felt confident in implementing project-based learning under *Kurikulum Merdeka*, citing lack of training and unclear guidelines (Putri & Pranata, 2024). In Malaysia, preliminary observations from secondary schools in Selangor and Sabah show that although KSSM implementation is structurally supported, teacher autonomy is limited, and school leaders often focus more on compliance than innovation (Juliyanti et al., 2025). Additionally, rural schools in both nations struggle with infrastructure, digital access, and consistent policy communication (Puspitasari & Maisarah, 2023). These implementation inconsistencies hinder the reforms' intended outcomes, revealing systemic weaknesses in school-based curriculum management.

Existing literature has primarily focused on single-country analyses. In Indonesia, studies often examine how teachers interpret *Kurikulum Merdeka*, revealing a lack of ongoing professional development and uneven access to resources (Mangali & Hamdan, 2015; Rahadian, 2023). In Malaysia, research tends to concentrate on curriculum content and assessment design, rather than examining how school leadership and administrative practices influence daily implementation (Education in Malaysia, 2023).

Quantitative and comparative data remain limited. For example, few studies offer metrics on school leadership readiness or teacher adaptation strategies across countries, despite both facing similar decentralization pressures and educational aspirations. Moreover, most previous works emphasize pedagogical design while overlooking the institutional and managerial dimensions that directly affect curriculum success at the operational level. This creates a critical research gap: How do schools in culturally and administratively distinct systems navigate shared curriculum challenges under different governance frameworks?

To address this, the present study offers a comparative institutional analysis of curriculum management practices in Indonesian and Malaysian secondary schools. By focusing on leadership structures, policy interpretation, and resource mobilization, the study explores how these variables shape curriculum implementation at the school level. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper

understanding of educational reform in Southeast Asia, grounded in both theory and practice, and fills an underexplored niche in comparative education literature.

Curriculum management plays a central role in shaping the effectiveness of secondary education by translating national education policies into actionable strategies at the school level (Sullanmaa et al., 2024; Sheyin, 2024). In Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, curriculum reforms such as *Kurikulum Merdeka* and *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah* (KSSM) have emerged within complex socio-political landscapes shaped by national development agendas, decentralization efforts, and the politics of educational equity. These reforms are not merely technical endeavors but are deeply influenced by each country's historical legacy, governance structure, and political commitment to educational transformation (Emawati et al., 2023; Puspitasari & Maisarah, 2023).

Indonesia's shift toward decentralization reflects broader political reforms and the promotion of local autonomy, leading to increased flexibility in curriculum implementation. Conversely, Malaysia's centralized curriculum model continues to reflect a top-down governance approach rooted in national unity and standardized development (Juliyanti et al., 2025). These socio-political differences significantly shape how curriculum policy is interpreted, adapted, and enacted in schools, influencing the capacity of school leaders and teachers to effectively manage curricular change (Putri & Pranata, 2024; Sihotang & Siregar, 2023).

Despite the growing interest in curriculum reform across the region, comparative studies focusing on curriculum management, particularly from an institutional and administrative perspective, remain limited in Southeast Asia. Most prior research has tended to isolate Indonesia or Malaysia in its analysis, focusing predominantly on pedagogical frameworks, content revision, or assessment strategies (Mangali & Hamdan, 2015; Education in Malaysia, 2023; Rahadian, 2023). What is missing is a nuanced understanding of how educational leadership, governance structures, and policy-practice dynamics interact across national contexts, an area where scholarly inquiry remains sparse. This study addresses this gap by providing a cross-national comparative lens on curriculum management in Indonesian and Malaysian secondary schools.

Unlike previous research that often isolates pedagogical issues or lacks regional comparison, this study explores how leadership, policy interpretation, and resource management impact curriculum implementation at the school level. The novelty lies in identifying convergences and divergences in managerial strategies employed across both nations, offering a deeper institutional and socio-political analysis. By highlighting how school administrators and teachers respond to top-down reforms within diverse governance frameworks (Sihotang & Siregar, 2023), the research contributes to broader discussions on regional educational governance in the Global South. This dual-country institutional perspective remains underrepresented in current literature and offers valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars interested in comparative curriculum reform.

This research contributes significantly to the academic and policy discourse on curriculum management in developing nations. In particular, it provides empirical and comparative evidence that can guide policymakers, school administrators, and educators in designing more coherent and responsive curriculum strategies. The findings also hold value for broader regional efforts in Southeast Asia to harmonize educational standards while respecting local diversity. By focusing on the operational level of curriculum delivery, the study offers a critical lens through which systemic educational improvements can be enacted.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative library research design to conduct a comparative analysis of curriculum management practices in secondary education systems in Indonesia and Malaysia. Library research is a methodologically rigorous approach that emphasizes the systematic collection, review, and synthesis of existing scholarly literature to answer a research problem (Chigbu et al., 2023; Smith, 2024; Simsek et al., 2023). This method is particularly suitable for conceptual and policy-based inquiries, especially when the aim is to compare institutional and educational practices across countries without extensive reliance on primary field data.

The data used in this study were obtained through a structured documentary analysis of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government education reports, policy documents, and international organization publications. Document selection followed a transparent and replicable process. The initial stage involved keyword-based searches using academic databases such as Sinta, Scopus, Springer, and Taylor & Francis Online, targeting literature published between 2013 and 2024. Keywords included: *curriculum management*, *curriculum implementation*, *secondary education*, *educational leadership*, *Indonesia*, and *Malaysia*.

From over 50 documents retrieved, a total of 26 scholarly articles and reports were selected after applying three key criteria: (1) relevance to the core themes of curriculum management and governance in secondary education; (2) credibility, meaning the source must be peer-reviewed or published by a recognized institution; and (3) thematic alignment with the objectives and analytical framework of this study. Each source was subjected to a quality appraisal that considered methodological transparency, data reliability, and contextual depth.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the study employed source triangulation and peer-reviewed literature filtering. Only reputable and indexed sources, particularly those listed in Scopus and Web of Science, were included in the final analysis. Additionally, the selection process was guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to promote transparency, traceability, and reproducibility (Nezameslami et al., 2025; Gazeau et al., 2024).

The collected literature was analyzed using a thematic content analysis

method. This involved coding textual data into key categories such as curriculum leadership, policy translation, administrative strategy, stakeholder involvement, and contextual challenges. Comparative dimensions were constructed to facilitate cross-country analysis, with particular attention to convergence and divergence in curriculum management practices (Humble & Mozelius, 2022; Vespestad & Clancy, 2021; Tharaba & Wahyudin, 2024). Thematic synthesis was conducted in three sequential stages: (1) data familiarization and initial coding, (2) clustering codes into higher-order themes, and (3) comparative synthesis of findings within and across national contexts. An intercoder reliability check was performed to enhance consistency and reduce researcher bias.

To complement the document analysis and enhance the empirical relevance of the findings, the study also incorporated exploratory interviews with a small sample of secondary school administrators, two from Indonesia and two from Malaysia. These interviews were conducted virtually using a semi-structured protocol, aiming to validate key themes and uncover real-world implementation challenges not fully captured in the literature. While not statistically representative, these interviews provided valuable qualitative insights that enriched the contextual interpretation of the data and added a grounded perspective to the comparative analysis.

This robust methodological approach, combining systematic document analysis with targeted empirical input, offers a credible and comprehensive understanding of how curriculum management systems are conceptualized, operationalized, and adapted in Indonesia and Malaysia. As such, the study contributes meaningfully to comparative education literature in Southeast Asia and highlights areas for further investigation and policy reflection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Governance and Autonomy in Curriculum Implementation

Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* represents a structural shift from centralized policy-making to decentralized curriculum governance. This policy grants schools discretion to design, implement, and evaluate curricular content in line with local contexts and learner needs (Hadi, 2025). For instance, a secondary school in Yogyakarta adopted project-based learning focused on local environmental challenges, encouraging students to analyze pollution in nearby rivers through interdisciplinary approaches (Putri & Pranata, 2024). This bottom-up innovation reflects Fullan's theory of educational change, which stresses the significance of local stakeholder ownership in sustaining reforms (Dimmock et al., 2021).

In contrast, Malaysia's *KSSM* preserves a centralized model that emphasizes policy uniformity and national cohesion. A case study from rural Sabah demonstrates how strict adherence to nationally standardized lesson plans constrained teachers from incorporating local indigenous knowledge, despite its relevance to student identity and engagement (Juliyanti et al., 2025). Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) argue that such centralized systems may secure policy consistency but

often at the cost of local responsiveness.

While Indonesia's model promotes flexibility, it presumes a baseline of school capacity and leadership readiness that does not yet exist universally. This decentralization without consistent professional infrastructure can exacerbate educational inequality. Malaysia's model, although effective in maintaining coherence, may limit localized innovation necessary for inclusive and culturally relevant pedagogy. Thus, governance reform must strike a balance between national standardization and contextual flexibility. Hybrid models, central guidance with optional localized enrichment, could reconcile this tension.

Leadership and Teacher Readiness

Leadership is a critical determinant in curriculum reform success. In Indonesia, *Kurikulum Merdeka* frames school principals as instructional leaders who play a pivotal role in facilitating curriculum planning, pedagogical support, and teacher collaboration (Putri & Pranata, 2024). This aligns with Hallinger's (2011) instructional leadership model, which places school leaders at the center of school transformation. Nonetheless, the uneven distribution of qualified leaders, especially in rural areas, limits the full realization of this vision (Sihotang & Siregar, 2023). For example, principals in East Nusa Tenggara reported struggling to interpret curriculum documents and support teachers due to limited training resources.

In Malaysia, principals largely operate within administrative parameters defined by centralized policy, focusing on accountability, data reporting, and policy enforcement rather than pedagogical guidance (Juliyanti et al., 2025). Teachers in Negeri Sembilan expressed reluctance to deviate from prescribed modules, citing fear of audit penalties. This compliance-driven model often stifles innovation at the school level.

Teacher readiness follows similar patterns. In Indonesia, teachers are encouraged to act as curriculum designers and facilitators of student-centered learning. Yet many educators, especially in under-resourced provinces, report lacking sufficient training in differentiated instruction and formative assessment (Sihotang & Siregar, 2023). In Malaysia, while regular professional development exists, it is typically top-down and rarely adaptive to classroom-level challenges (Hadi, 2025).

Both systems demonstrate a disconnect between reform ideals and on-the-ground capacity. Indonesia needs to invest in leadership pipelines and provide sustained mentoring systems for principals transitioning into instructional roles. Malaysia should reframe leadership as a dual role (administrative and pedagogical) to ensure principals can facilitate meaningful teaching and learning improvements. In both contexts, teacher development must shift from episodic workshops to embedded, collaborative, and inquiry-based models such as PLCs (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Guskey, 2002), tailored to each country's governance context.

Policy-Implementation Gaps and Digital Integration

The ambitious aspirations of curriculum reform are often diluted by weak implementation mechanisms. In Indonesia, decentralization without equal capacity has led to fragmented practices across schools. In a case from Central Kalimantan, schools reported confusion over assessment standards and curriculum mapping, resulting in inconsistent delivery (Rudiatwoko et al., 2025). Malaysia's frequent policy updates, though well-documented, have generated fatigue among educators. Teachers in Perak expressed difficulty keeping pace with instructional revisions while managing heavy administrative loads (Hadi, 2025).

Digital technology is promoted in both nations to bridge resource and communication gaps. Malaysia's *Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia* provides structured ICT support and e-learning platforms. However, a school in Kelantan highlighted that although devices were distributed, teacher training on digital pedagogy was minimal, resulting in low integration into actual instruction (Juliyanti et al., 2025). In Indonesia, while platforms like *Merdeka Mengajar* offer open-source resources, infrastructure challenges in regions like Papua have impeded their effective use (Sihotang & Siregar, 2023).

These conditions align with the TPACK framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), which stresses that effective digital integration depends not just on access to technology, but on the synergy of content knowledge, pedagogy, and technological fluency.

The policy-implementation gap is not merely technical but systemic. Bridging this divide requires coordinated strategies that include clear communication, phased rollout of reforms, and feedback loops between policy-makers and implementers. Digital tools can enhance curriculum delivery, but only if accompanied by comprehensive professional development and infrastructure investment. Both countries must move beyond "technology distribution" toward building digital teaching competencies as a long-term strategy for instructional transformation.

Stakeholder Engagement and School-Based Management

Stakeholder participation is essential for sustainable reform, yet it is uneven across both countries. Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* promotes community-based learning design. A school in East Java, for instance, involved local artisans in developing a cultural heritage curriculum unit, increasing student engagement and relevance (Hadi, 2025). This reflects Epstein's (2011) framework, which underscores the value of family and community involvement in student success.

In Malaysia, stakeholder engagement is often formal but superficial. Parents are typically invited to school events but seldom involved in curricular decisions (Juliyanti et al., 2025). Teachers in Johor reported that while parent committees exist, their input is rarely integrated into curriculum planning. Trust and shared ownership remain missing links in the reform equation.

School-Based Management (SBM) is encouraged in both nations as a vehicle

for localized curriculum design. In Indonesia, schools in Bandung and Lombok have contextualized science instruction to reflect agricultural and marine livelihoods, enhancing relevance (Putri & Pranata, 2024). However, disparities in school leadership and resource availability result in inconsistent execution (Rudiatwoko et al., 2025). Malaysia's SBM model remains constrained by rigid bureaucratic structures that limit school autonomy (Juliyanti et al., 2025).

Genuine stakeholder collaboration is more than consultation, it requires institutional frameworks that embed community voice into curriculum decisions. Indonesia shows promising practices but needs to systematize and scale them. Malaysia must evolve from symbolic engagement toward models that empower schools and communities through participatory governance. SBM reform should be coupled with capacity-building and financial autonomy to allow schools to act meaningfully on local priorities.

Equity Considerations

Equity is a recurring theme across both systems, often manifesting through regional disparities. In Indonesia, significant gaps in infrastructure, teacher distribution, and funding compromise the reach of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. In Maluku, for example, schools lack basic resources to support inquiry-based learning, leaving students disadvantaged despite curricular freedoms (Putri & Pranata, 2024). Malaysia, although more uniform in infrastructure, still faces performance gaps between urban and rural schools, particularly in states like Kelantan and Terengganu (Juliyanti et al., 2025).

Darling-Hammond (2010) warns that reforms that do not address structural inequalities risk reproducing or deepening them. Tailored interventions are required. Indonesia needs targeted resource allocation and contextual teacher support, while Malaysia must consider differentiated implementation strategies that reflect demographic and regional diversity.

Equity must be embedded as a guiding principle in both curriculum design and its implementation. This means not only leveling access to materials and training, but also ensuring that curriculum content and pedagogy reflect the lived realities of diverse student populations. National reform strategies must include mechanisms for monitoring equity outcomes and adapting interventions based on need and context.

CONCLUSION

This comparative study of curriculum management practices in Indonesia and Malaysia reveals notable differences in governance structures, leadership roles, teacher readiness, and curriculum implementation models. Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* promotes decentralization and school-level autonomy, enabling contextualized innovation aligned with local needs. However, this flexibility is constrained by uneven leadership quality and disparities in teacher competence, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. Meanwhile, Malaysia's *KSSM*

upholds a centralized system that ensures standardization and policy coherence but often limits pedagogical adaptability and teacher agency at the school level.

Leadership emerges as a critical determinant of reform success in both systems. In Indonesia, strengthening principals' capacity as instructional leaders is essential to support the shift toward decentralized curriculum management. Targeted leadership development programs and enhanced professional learning communities (PLCs) can help bridge the policy-practice gap. Conversely, in Malaysia, while leadership structures are well-established, policymakers could consider introducing structured flexibility within the centralized framework, such as pilot programs for curriculum adaptation, to allow schools to innovate while maintaining national standards.

Digital integration, stakeholder participation, and school-based management (SBM) present promising avenues for enhancing curriculum delivery in both contexts. However, these mechanisms require differentiated policy support. For Indonesia, this may involve improving digital infrastructure and fostering genuine community-school partnerships to support localized curriculum development. In Malaysia, efforts could focus on deepening teacher engagement through more participatory models of professional development and promoting school-level discretion in pedagogical strategies within national curriculum boundaries.

The novelty of this research lies in its direct, institutional-level comparison of curriculum governance across two Southeast Asian nations undergoing parallel yet distinct reform trajectories. It contributes to the theoretical discourse on decentralization, instructional leadership, and teacher agency by highlighting the complex interplay between national policies and local implementation capacities.

From a policy perspective, this study underscores the importance of aligning macro-level reform agendas with the operational realities of schools. In Indonesia, this entails equipping school leaders and teachers with the necessary authority and capacity to interpret and apply curriculum frameworks effectively. In Malaysia, it suggests a need to recalibrate central directives to allow room for bottom-up innovations that respect school diversity.

Ultimately, effective curriculum reform in both countries hinges on integrated strategies that link policy coherence with local responsiveness. This includes sustained investments in leadership development, inclusive governance mechanisms, and context-sensitive professional learning. The study encourages further comparative research that incorporates cultural, political, and institutional variables in understanding curriculum change, contributing to broader efforts toward building equitable and adaptive education systems in the Global South.

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