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## Overcoming Barriers to Multicultural Education in Southeast Asia: A Thematic Review

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper underscores the importance of multicultural education in Southeast Asia, a culturally diverse region. Through a thematic review of selected relevant scholarly literature, the authors identified barriers impeding multicultural education, specifically the lack of diverse representation in the curriculum, prevalent cultural stereotypes and biases, language barriers in multilingual classrooms, and socioeconomic disparities affecting educational access. Additionally, the discussion proposes coping strategies and ongoing initiatives, including curriculum modifications, intercultural training for educators, and the penta helix model's role in cultivating a more inclusive and equitable educational environment in Southeast Asia.

**KEYWORDS:** Diversity, education, inclusive, multiculturalism, Southeast Asia

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Over the last two decades, the concept of globalization has been widely recognized. However, the concept of globalization has become more significant only with the widespread adoption of digital technology. As digital technology allows people to connect globally, cultural diversity is significantly growing (Lonto & Umbase, 2020), and the need to embrace multiculturalism becomes crucial. In essence, multiculturalism is the idea that society is enhanced by preserving, respecting, and fostering cultural diversity (Banks, 2015; Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2020). Subsequently, having this knowledge may assist individuals in adapting to these changes by facilitating global market navigation, communication, and cooperation through an understanding of diverse cultural nuances (Sun et al., 2023).

The same account applies to the Southeast Asian region. The region comprises 11 countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Philippines, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Timor Leste) and is home to over 1,300 distinct ethnic groups, each possessing unique languages, traditions, and customs (Arianto et al., 2021; Aryowiloto, 2019; Liu & Ricks, 2022). While a source of immense cultural wealth, this diversity also presents significant challenges in fostering social cohesion and national unity (Giglietto et al., 2022). In recent years, multiculturalism has been growing in recognition as a potential paradigm for tackling these difficulties and fostering inclusive societies. Inevitably, in an increasingly interconnected global landscape, it is becoming more important for the global community to consider carefully and develop proper and updated initiatives of multicultural practices across the globe, including in the Southeast Asian region (Regus, 2023; Saravanamuttu, 2002).

This paper underscores the critical role of multicultural education in Southeast Asia. Being capable of navigating diverse cultural landscapes has become an essential skill as globalization and digital interconnectivity continue to blur national boundaries and increase cross-cultural interactions. Furthermore, the region's history of colonialism, migration, and domestic conflict has created complicated socioeconomic structures that necessitate nuanced approaches related to feelings of nationality and identity (Koh, 2015; Torun, 2023). In this context, multiculturalism is a paradigm that cultivates a shared sense of national identity by acknowledging and valuing cultural diversity. Multicultural practices do not have to be uniform; instead, this paradigm suggests that various practices are necessary. Among those varieties, education has emerged as the primary and unifying medium through which multicultural ideals can be instilled and practiced. There are at least three main reasons why education plays a pivotal role in fostering core multicultural values, such as tolerance, mutual respect, and social justice (Banks, 2015; Verkuyten & Yogeewaran, 2020).

To begin, schools as educational institutions function as miniatures of society, bringing together students from varied backgrounds and creating a controlled environment for intercultural learning (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2023). Second, the formative aspect of education in schools enables the early introduction of multicultural ideals, potentially shaping lifelong attitudes and behaviors (Moreu et al., 2021). Finally, because they can reach an extensive range of people, educational institutions are ideal platforms for initiating significant social change (Sukmayadi, 2024; Trolan & Parker, 2022). Nevertheless, the implementation of multicultural education in Southeast Asia is confronted with a multitude of challenges. These obstacles encompass a wide variety of factors, including deeply ingrained social beliefs and structural issues within education systems (Cathrin & Wikandaru, 2023; Lonto & Umbase, 2020; Regus, 2023).

Hence, the authors were motivated to conduct this thematic review by concentrating on two main issues: The common barriers to multicultural education in Southeast Asia and alternative initiatives aimed at surmounting those barriers. By exploring a wide range of current and relevant literature related to the issue of multicultural education in Southeast Asia, it is expected that this paper could

provide an additional reference for the development of educational practices that celebrate diversity, foster social cohesion, and equip students as well as educators with the necessary skills to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The concept of multicultural education is employed in this paper to explore the challenges and mitigation strategies associated with multicultural education in Southeast Asia. Our primary theoretical framework is based on the paradigm proposed by Banks (2015). This theoretical framework underscores the critical importance of pedagogical approaches that challenge dominant cultural narratives, promote justice, and establish inclusive educational environments that reflect diverse identities and experiences.

Multicultural education involves not only the celebration of diversity but also the critique of power structures, curriculum biases, and systemic inequalities that influence access to and representation within educational systems. Further research supports Banks' (2015) perspective that multicultural education emphasizes the importance of curriculum equity by ensuring the adequate representation of diverse cultural, linguistic, and religious perspectives in educational materials. This approach fosters pedagogical inclusion by providing training for educators to identify and eliminate stereotypes, biases, and detrimental assimilation practices. Sensitivity to socio-economic conditions is essential for addressing the structural inequalities that have historically hampered marginalized communities from accessing quality and appropriate education (Erbaş, 2019; Sibaweh et al., 2024; Vavrus, 2023).

In Southeast Asia, the intersection of colonial heritage (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017), ethnic diversity with over 1,300 distinct ethnic groups (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024), and socio-economic stratification provides a theoretical framework for comprehending the challenges and advancements in multicultural education. This framework guides our thematic categorization of challenges from curricular and social perspectives and analyzes the mitigation strategies implemented in Southeast Asia. It includes recommendations for curriculum reform and other insights that contribute to the development of multicultural education in the region. In other words, this framework serves as a guide for the synthesis of existing literature and the interpretation of the manner in which multicultural idealism is navigated within the complex socio-political and educational landscape of Southeast Asia.

### **Methods**

In this study, the authors employ a thematic literature review. It is an academic endeavor that methodically organizes and analyzes a corpus of literature

by identifying, evaluating, and reporting themes found in scholarly publications (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2021). In conducting the review, we adapted the thematic literature review steps from Cisco (2014) by selecting relevant and appropriate sources related to the abovementioned issues. Then, we analyzed patterns or themes in the resources that addressed the issues mentioned above. Further details on the data gathering and analysis process are described below.

### **Data Gathering Process**

The search process was guided by a two-cluster thematic approach. The first cluster (Barriers to Multicultural Education in Southeast Asia), utilized keywords such as "multicultural education," "diversity in education," "educational barriers," "curriculum bias," and "assimilation in schools." The second cluster (Strategies and Initiatives) explored mitigation strategies, with search terms including "inclusive education," "multicultural curriculum," "curriculum reform," "intercultural teacher training," and "educational policy." To ensure relevance, these terms were consistently combined with geographical identifiers (e.g., "Southeast Asia" or names of individual countries in the region) using Boolean operators (AND/OR).

The authors conducted the article search in two main phases. The first phase utilized Elicit, an AI research assistant, for an initial exploratory search. Recognizing the potential for algorithmic bias and a lack of transparency in such AI-driven tools (Pagano et al., 2023), a second phase was necessary to ensure rigor. This second phase consisted of a systematic, keyword-based search conducted directly within Scopus and Google Scholar. The two-phase process was thus designed to combine the conceptual discovery offered by AI with the replicable precision of traditional database searching. The selection of these databases is supported by their comprehensive coverage and larger volume of peer-reviewed publications in comparison to other platforms (Bramer et al., 2017; Martín-Martín et al., 2021).

The search filters were set to find the most relevant peer-reviewed articles published within the last ten years (2015- 2024), and the content is consistent with the topic under investigation. The established inclusion and exclusion criteria are detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusion Criteria	Papers explicitly focusing on Southeast Asia and multicultural issues in the region.
	Review papers or field research discussing multicultural education topics published within the last 10 years (2015–2024).
	Papers presenting findings, case studies, or recommendations related to the development of multicultural education in the region.
Exclusion Criteria	Papers examining education or multiculturalism outside the context of Southeast Asia or beyond the 2015–2024 period.
	Papers not directly related to the concepts of education and multiculturalism.
	Non-academic articles, news, and opinion writings

A total of 17 articles were included for further review. At this point, the search yielded only those relevant articles discovered in the main search. We obtained additional relevant publications by referring to the bibliographies of the selected articles, which may have been overlooked during our initial search. These articles were evaluated to determine whether they met the criteria to be included in the review. As a result, nine publications were added, for a total of 26.

These 26 articles were double-checked to ensure they matched the review criteria. This phase led to the exclusion of six articles, as it was discovered that their publication was outside the scope of the review. Thus, a selection of 20 studies formed the final content of the literature review. Furthermore, this review utilized only secondary data and open-source publications, thus obviating the need for additional ethical approval. In terms of the use of AI tools, we acknowledge the use of ‘Copilot’, ‘Elicit’, and ‘Grammarly’ for assisting us in conducting background research, searching relevant literature, providing suggestions for enhancements in writing style, structuring outlines, and proofreading. No AI-generated content has been claimed as our own work. Furthermore, the authors maintain adherence to professional codes of practice, legal requirements, and compliance with data in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by the Indonesian Researcher Union (2019).

## Data Analysis

Once we had selected the final group of relevant and appropriate sources related to our topics, the authors continued to analyze for patterns or themes

across our resources, discussing related issues such as data, key findings, statements, or concepts. This process helped us to understand what each contributed to the discussion. We then organized the sources by the identified themes and rearrange what we learn from each into the thematic structure that allowed us to convey to our readers an understanding of the state of knowledge about the barriers of multicultural education in Southeast Asia, followed by the alternative solutions.

At this stage, the authors finalized the review process and started to work on compiling the main findings related to the two discussed issues. A visual summary of the references of the 20 studies analyzed in this review can be seen in Table 2. Furthermore, the detailed report of the thematic review is presented in the findings section

**Table 2**

*List of Selected Studies*

Code	References	Code	References
S1	(Omar et al., 2015)	S11	(Chandransu, 2019)
S2	(Oo, 2015)	S12	(Leepreecha & Meixi, 2019)
S3	(Asrori, 2016)	S13	(Mukminin et al., 2019)
S4	(Lee, 2016)	S14	(Kim, 2020)
S5	(Zhang et al., 2016)	S15	(Raguindin et al., 2020)
S6	Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, (2017)	S16	(Torres & Tarozzi, 2020)
S7	(Arphattananon, 2018)	S17	(Anui & Arphattananon, 2021)
S8	(Jolliffe & Bruce, 2018)	S18	(Jayadi et al., 2022)
S9	(Maestro et al., 2018)	S19	(Nurman et al., 2022)
S10	(Nakaya, 2018)	S20	(Nguyen & Huynh, 2023)

## Findings and Discussion

To organize the findings from the 20 selected studies, we structured our analysis around the two primary issues central to this research: The barriers to multicultural education in Southeast Asia and the strategies to overcome them. Through an iterative review process, we identified recurring concepts within the articles and grouped them into distinct themes. For the first issue, four key themes emerged regarding the barriers to multicultural education (see Table 3). As for the second issue, three key themes were identified regarding the strategies to mitigate these challenges (see Table 4). This structure allows us to clearly map the connections between the core research issues, the emergent themes, and the relevant literature that informed the analysis.

**Table 3***Thematization of Barriers to Multicultural Education in Southeast Asia*

Main Issue	Relevant Articles	Themes
Barriers to Multicultural Education in Southeast Asia	Arphattananon (2018)	1. Lack of diverse representation in the curriculum
	Jolliffe & Bruce (2018)	
	Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat (2017)	
	Torres & Tarozzi (2020)	
	Cárdenas-Rodríguez & Terrón-Caro (2021)	2. Assimilation-centered curriculum
	Kim (2020)	
	Leepreecha & Meixi (2019)	
	Maestro et al. (2018)	
	Omar et al. (2015)	
	Asrori (2016)	3. Prevalence of cultural stereotypes and biases
	Jayadi et al. (2022)	
	Nakaya (2018)	
	Jayadi et al. (2022)	4. Socioeconomic disparities affecting access to education
	Kim (2020)	

**Table 4***Thematization of Strategies to Overcome Barriers in Multicultural Education*

Main Issue	Relevant Articles	Themes
Strategies and Initiatives	Anui & Arphattananon (2021)	1. Incorporating diverse perspectives in the curriculum
	Arphattananon (2018)	
	Chandransu (2019)	
	Mukminin et al. (2019)	
	Oo (2015)	
	Zhang et al. (2016)	
	Lee (2016)	2. Providing cultural sensitivity training for educators
	Maestro et al. (2018)	
	Nguyen & Huynh (2023)	
	Raguindin et al. (2020)	
	Arphattananon (2018)	3. Shifting from assimilation-centered to multicultural-centered curricula
	Kim (2020)	
	Maestro et al. (2018)	
Nurman et al. (2022)		

The purpose of this division is to assist readers in recognizing articles that provide a comprehensive understanding of the two analyzed issues and the consequent themes. We acknowledge the themes' innate interconnectedness and view this as an essential aspect when exploring the complex nature of multicultural education in Southeast Asia. A detailed discussion of each theme is described in the following subsections.

## **Barriers to Multicultural Education in Southeast Asia**

Based on our review of the selected articles, several barriers to multicultural education in Southeast Asia have been identified. These barriers reveal significant challenges that hinder the effective integration of multicultural principles within the region's educational frameworks. First, there is a critical need for diverse representation within the various national curricula in Southeast Asia, which currently needs more inclusivity. Secondly, the persistence of an assimilation-centered curriculum further worsens the issue, as it undermines cultural diversity. Third, cultural stereotypes and biases continue to penetrate educational settings, maintaining inequality. Finally, socioeconomic disparities remain a significant barrier, restricting equitable access to education. Below are the specific explanations of the barriers.

### ***Lack of Diverse Representation in the Curriculum***

One prominent barrier that emerged as a recurring theme from the literature review was the need for more diversity representation in the curriculum. Southeast Asia's history of colonialism, migration, and domestic conflicts has shaped a region with complicated societal structures. This historical complexity is paired with an immense cultural diversity; the region contains over 1,300 ethnic groups with distinct languages and traditions (Arianto et al., 2021; Aryowiloto, 2019; Liu & Ricks, 2022). It is within this specific context that the need for diversity representation in the region's various educational curricula becomes a particularly pressing issue.

A number of scholars (Jolliffe & Bruce, 2018; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017; Koh, 2015) argue that many Southeast Asian curricula are still trying to distance themselves from colonial influence, frequently giving preference to Western viewpoints while overlooking local and Indigenous knowledge systems (Arphattananon, 2021; Jolliffe & Bruce, 2018). This Western-focused bias not only marginalizes non-dominant cultures but also promotes a knowledge hierarchy that can widen social inequalities. Other scholars have pinpointed examples of this barrier (Arphattananon, 2018; Asrori, 2016; Jayadi et al., 2022; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017; Patras et al., 2022).

The incorporation of religious diversity into curricula presents a significant challenge for countries with a prevalent state religion like Indonesia (Asrori, 2016). An absence of comprehensive religious education that acknowledges minority faiths can result in tensions and misunderstandings among communities. This problem persists even within national curricula designed around unifying principles. These curricula often emphasize the values of the majority religious community, which in turn marginalizes other groups (Asrori, 2016).

As for language education, Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat (2017) emphasize how local and Indigenous languages in Southeast Asia countries sometimes decline

when the focus on dominant national languages and global languages like English predominate. This trend not only suppresses linguistic diversity but also undermines the cultural identities associated with these languages. Patras et al. (2022), Jayadi et al. (2022), and Arphattananon (2018) have documented efforts to address these issues by describing initiatives in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Myanmar to incorporate more diverse cultural content into the national curriculum. However, the studies found that these initiatives frequently face objections from various stakeholders, including political organizations and conservative educators. In other words, it is evident that this challenge is a perpetual occurrence. The cultural diversity of the region is extensive; thus, it is imperative to address the need for more inclusive curriculum development approaches that reflect this reality.

### ***Assimilation-centered Curriculum***

The next emerging theme is an assimilation-centered curriculum, which highlights the dominant ethnic or cultural group's perspectives (Banks, 2015). Such curriculum can potentially minimize minority cultures and hinder the development of ideal inclusive educational environments. Studies done in Southeast Asia show a typical pattern of curriculum emphasizing integration and stressing narratives of the majority culture while somewhat disregarding the perspectives of minority groups. In the context of national identity construction, Chiong and Gopinathan (2018) note that Singapore and Malaysia have a predominantly majority-oriented approach, with a strong emphasis on assimilation into the majority ethnic culture (e.g., Malay ethnicity in Malaysia; Chinese ethnicity in Singapore), which has resulted in vernacular schools, defined as educational institutions that use native or local languages as the primary medium of instruction (Omar et al., 2015; Regus, 2023; Saravanamuttu, 2002). Unfortunately, neither the national assimilation approach nor the vernacular school system seems to be able to accommodate the ethnic groups living in the nation and unintentional cultural segregation has resulted.

Subsequently, Indonesian scholars have discussed the practical execution of the *Pancasila* (five national principles) and *Bhineka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity) as guiding principles of the curriculum. They observed that, while the curriculum seeks to unite the diverse archipelago, it frequently does so by disregarding local cultural subtleties and emphasizing the values of the majority ethnic groups or religious communities (Asrori, 2016; Cathrin & Wikandaru, 2023; Jayadi et al., 2022). The Philippines is also subject to a comparable critique of the extensively nationalized standard curriculum (Paras, 2020). Concerns have been raised regarding standardized curricula that predominantly reflect the perspective of the dominant ethnic group, as it poses risks of marginalizing the nation's rich cultural diversity (Paras, 2020; Torrejas et al., 2023). This uniform approach to teaching national ideals and history may unintentionally suppress minority narratives and limit the inclusivity of the educational experience.

From these studies, we can interpret that initiatives to foster national unity through education often result in the unintended consequence of sidelining minority values and cultures. This approach not only generates tensions and poses barriers for minority communities but also fails to adequately represent the rich cultural diversity of the Southeast Asian region. Consequently, it is imperative to re-evaluate these strategies to ensure that the pursuit of national unity does not undermine the diverse cultural identities present in the region.

### ***Prevalence of Cultural Stereotypes and Biases***

Stereotypes and cultural prejudices remain a significant problem in Southeast Asian's multicultural education. Deeply rooted biases, frequently perpetuated unintentionally by teachers and educational resources, can impede the creation of inclusive educational settings and intercultural comprehension among learners (Torres & Tarozzi, 2020). Stereotypes still subtly exist in educational textbooks and the realities of Indigenous and ethnic minority groups in the Southeast Asian region are not often properly represented. For instance, in the Philippines, numerous textbooks depict Indigenous peoples through outdated, romanticized perspectives, disregarding their present-day difficulties (Torrejas et al., 2023). Similarly, Leepreecha and Meixi's (2019) study in Thailand has discovered that textbooks and teaching practices frequently propagate negative stereotypes, explicitly misrepresenting minority groups within the country and those from neighboring countries.

Stereotypes in education extend beyond ethnic differences to include gender issues. Indonesian and Malaysian school textbooks were found to exhibit a pro-male bias. Female occupations were typically conventional and less esteemed, while female characteristics were predominantly shy and passive (Asrori, 2016; Islam & Asadullah, 2018; Jayadi et al., 2022). Furthermore, the studies indicate that women were frequently depicted in domestic and indoor activities, while males were more prevalent in professional roles. These stereotypical portrayals might create a disconnect between learners and the communities being portrayed. If this trend continues, it may result in a lack of empathy and understanding for gender equity and minority groups.

### ***Socioeconomic Disparities Affecting Access to Education***

Ensuring access to quality education is a fundamental right, but inequalities continue to exist among Southeast Asian countries. Based on the review of the selected studies, there are two main concerns regarding socioeconomic issues. First, striking the ideal balance between access and quality continues to be an issue in Southeast Asia. Although increasing educational accessibility is important, it does not always ensure quality. A quality education, often privileged for a few with demographic and socioeconomic benefits, may not equitably benefit marginalized groups (Qureshi et al., 2020). For example, the Philippines and

Indonesia continue to face challenges in ensuring all students have access to a high-quality education. Quality education is more readily accessible to those situated close to the center of government and the economy due to political dynamics and geographical conditions (Jayadi et al., 2022; Paras, 2020). Secondly, the economic situation still poses a challenge for education equity. According to a 2019 analysis by the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) on educational equity data, children from wealthy families acquire greater learning levels, whilst those from disadvantaged backgrounds lack quality opportunities (UNICEF, 2020).

In the context of multiculturalism, socioeconomic disparities can generate a multifaceted array of barriers that intensify preexisting cultural and ethnic divisions, rendering it challenging to establish educational environments that are genuinely inclusive and multicultural. We cannot avoid the familiar fact that children from underprivileged households, who frequently identify with minority ethnic groups, are often less motivated to pursue their education beyond primary school (UNICEF, 2020). As a result, this early exodus from the educational system limits their exposure to multicultural ideas while reinforcing existing socioeconomic disparities.

### **Strategies and Initiatives to Overcome the Barriers**

In addition to identifying barriers to multicultural education in Southeast Asia which we discussed above, we also note strategies and initiatives to overcoming these barriers prevalent in the literature reviewed. This section will discuss three identified themes in this category: Incorporating diverse perspectives in the curriculum, providing cultural sensitivity training to educators, and shifting from assimilation-centered to multicultural-centered curricula.

#### ***Incorporating Diverse Perspectives in the Curriculum***

To achieve equitable and inclusive multicultural education in Southeast Asia, it is crucial to incorporate diverse perspectives within the school curriculum as an initial step. This theme was apparent in several scholarly works that analyzed the progress of multicultural education curriculum in multiple Southeast Asian countries (Anui & Arphattananon, 2021; Arphattananon, 2018; Chandransu, 2019; Mukminin et al., 2019; Nurman et al., 2022; Oo, 2015; Zhang et al., 2016). Authors agree that education curriculum should represent a country's cultural diversity, allowing students to appreciate and learn about their own and other cultures. Integration can be achieved by adopting elements of diverse cultures and incorporating the unique beliefs, values, and practices of each culture into the curriculum. For instance, Myanmar's history curriculum encompasses not only the majority community's perspective on history but also the historical roots and contributions of ethnic groups to the nation's history (Anui & Arphattananon, 2021).

Nevertheless, integrating diversity elements into the curriculum is not the only condition for developing a more inclusive education curriculum. Chandransu (2019) studied how music education in the primary school curriculum can aid Thailand in achieving more creative multicultural education. According to this study, music as an educational medium can be beneficial by instilling in kids the principles of tolerance and diversity. In addition, other types of educational programs, such as alternative education and Indigenous education programs, are also an essential component of this endeavor. These programs have the dual purpose of preserving and advancing local cultures while ensuring that students have access to knowledge that applies to their everyday experiences (Mukminin et al., 2019). Take the Philippines as an example; it has been establishing an alternative education program to help minority communities unable to attend conventional education. Based on an empirical evaluation by Oo (2015), the initiative has effectively engaged with educationally marginalized populations, including Indigenous communities.

Additionally, numerous other initiatives may be implemented, such as organizing events that are themed around multiculturalism. Educational institutions are believed to be capable of establishing an environment that is more inclusive in order to enhance students' awareness and exchange of cultural diversity. Events, such as cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and cooperative events with cultural exchange programs, can be organized to rejuvenate diversity awareness. These events have been demonstrated to offer students in Indonesia and Thailand the opportunity to share and celebrate their cultural heritage, thereby providing valuable learning opportunities (Arphattananon, 2018; Chandransu, 2019; Nurman et al., 2022). Zhang et al. (2016) further pointed out that hosting multicultural-focused activities in educational institutions enhances students' learning experience and promotes unity and mutual respect among them. This strategy can effectively address the first and second barriers discussed above (lack of diverse representation in the curriculum and assimilation-centered curriculum). The integration of local, national, and worldwide cultural content will likely make the curriculum less homogeneous and more representational of diversity.

### ***Providing Cultural Sensitivity Training for Educators***

Strengthening the cultural sensitivity of educators is essential in addressing the barriers to adopting multicultural education. To enhance the cross-cultural competency of educators, workshops should be designed with a specific focus on inclusive education and multiculturalism. These workshops are gaining popularity in Southeast Asia and are seen as valuable for providing strategies and resources to effectively handle a culturally diverse classroom (Raguindin et al., 2020). They allow teachers to anticipate and address potential cultural challenges, such as bias or stereotyping.

Another additional step that can be taken to enhance teachers' sensitivity capacity is to extend invitations to guest speakers from diverse cultural

backgrounds or to engage in partnerships with local community leaders. Both can provide educators with valuable and fresh views and perspectives. Maestro et al. (2018) noted that having classroom guest speakers from various backgrounds has worked well in sharing diverse cultural knowledge and experiences, thus raising the awareness of multicultural values, particularly tolerance and mutual respect. Thailand serves as a prime example of this initiative. Thai Indigenous community leaders are invited to schools to discuss their traditions and values, which provides students with perspectives often missing from standard school materials (Lee, 2016). Similarly, in Vietnam, schools collaborate with Indigenous communities to develop educational curricula that are more relevant and responsive to multicultural environments (Nguyen & Huynh, 2023).

This approach could indeed serve as an alternative mitigation tool for the third and fourth barriers identified: Prevalence of cultural stereotypes and socioeconomic disparities affecting access to education. While training programs supplemented by subsidies or governmental assistance address accessibility disparities for schools in underprivileged regions, trained teachers can identify and mitigate bias in classroom interactions (Goldan et al., 2022). This community-classroom collaboration demonstrates that a willingness to accept and incorporate ideas can foster stronger relationships between educational institutions and the communities they serve. This relationship can subsequently encourage positive outcomes for enhancing the involvement of diverse Indigenous communities in the formal education process.

### ***Shifting from Assimilation-centered to Multicultural-centered Curricula***

The willingness to shift from an assimilation-centered curriculum model to a multicultural-centered curriculum is an essential part of the multicultural education process in Southeast Asia (Arphattananon, 2018; Kim, 2020; Maestro et al., 2018; Nurman et al., 2022). The literature review suggests two main approaches to accomplish this shift. The first comes from political will in curriculum modifications; the second is educational policies on local cultural content and mother tongue instruction. Initially, the realization of a more multicultural school curriculum necessitates political will. Previous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of government political will on the reform of the education curriculum. This includes the implementation of critical multicultural education, an education approach that prioritizes the needs of the child, the promotion of freedom in learning, and the adoption of a more adaptable curriculum (Arphattananon, 2018; Nurman et al., 2022; Oo, 2015). Second, shifting the education curriculum from assimilation to multiculturalism necessitates education policies that encourage teaching regional culture and mother tongue, particularly in the K-12 curriculum. In South Korea, for example, this approach is essential for preserving local culture and language and allowing students to embrace their cultural roots (Kim, 2020). In Southeast Asia, it is common practice to incorporate the mother language and local cultural

education in educational institutions to foster a solid cultural identity (Maestro et al., 2018).

A strong multicultural education should emphasize the need to develop students' critical thinking skills in response to socio-cultural issues in their communities. A more adaptable curriculum approach will also enable education delivery in the local context to be more appropriately customized. For instance, in Thailand, initiatives to create educational modules are focused on developing curriculum materials that address cultural diversity and the development of strategies for learners to coexist harmoniously in a multicultural society (Arphattananon, 2018). Similarly, in Indonesia, the government's Character Development Education policy has facilitated curriculum modifications that reflect cultural diversity by incorporating multicultural content into the curriculum and implementing multilingual-based programs (Nurman et al., 2022). This transformation process can address the aforementioned four barriers to multicultural education in Southeast Asia in a holistic way. The shift to a more multicultural curriculum can facilitate comprehension and appreciation of cultural, religious, and social diversity for both students and teachers. This is crucial for cultivating tolerant and sympathetic individuals in pluralistic civilizations like those in Southeast Asia.

### **The Penta Helix Model of Multicultural Education in Southeast Asia**

Upon analyzing the barriers to fostering multicultural education in Southeast Asia and investigating different initiatives to overcome these barriers, the authors realize that the successful implementation of multicultural education is closely tied to the involvement of multiple stakeholders. The findings of this thematic analysis indicate that at least five stakeholders play an essential role in promoting the implementation of multicultural education in Southeast Asia: academics, government, the private sector, the community, and the media. Each stakeholder plays a role in fostering and advocating for multicultural education. Nevertheless, the findings of this thematic analysis imply that each stakeholder possesses a distinct role, and the relations need to be clearly described. Hence, the authors have attempted to remap and integrate the roles of each stakeholder in the form of a penta helix model. As highlighted by Sudiana et al. (2020), the model is highly useful in multi-stakeholder problem areas, where stakeholders represent a range of interests regarding a particular site or issue. As such, the penta helix model can be employed to promote a holistic and synergistic approach to establishing multicultural education in Southeast Asia, as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1***Penta Helix Model of Multicultural Education in Southeast Asia*

Because the model directly intersects with education delivery, scholars play a critical role. Scholars from universities and schools can conduct practice-based research to recommend modifications for a more inclusive and relevant education curriculum (Anui & Arphattananon, 2021; Maestro et al., 2018; Mukminin et al., 2019). Subsequently, educational institutions can establish the value of multicultural education by endorsing these recommendations and incorporating them in their own school systems. Furthermore, schools can foster the importance of multicultural education by offering training for educators that explicitly emphasizes the promotion of inter-cultural awareness (Lee, 2016; Nguyen & Huynh, 2023; Raguindin et al., 2020).

Next, the private sector and governments are instrumental in fostering multicultural education in Southeast Asia. In addition to providing funding and resources to support related programs, governments serve as regulators by designing and enacting policies incorporating multicultural education into the national curriculum (Arphattananon, 2018; Nurman et al., 2022). Simultaneously, the business sector can contribute through corporate social responsibility initiatives that prioritize promoting inclusive education. The contribution can be made through activities, such as offering scholarships, constructing educational infrastructure, and endorsing educational programs that promote multicultural education. This type of educational investment initiative can also mitigate the disparity in educational access resulting from socioeconomic disparities in Southeast Asian communities (Jayadi et al., 2022; Paras, 2020).

The penta helix synergy is also significantly influenced by other stakeholders, including communities and the media. Communities have the ability to organize cultural festivals, intercultural dialogues, and other cultural inclusivity

programs, such as talk shows in schools or other collaborative activities that foster mutual trust and respect for cultural diversity (Arphattananon, 2018; Chandransu, 2019; Nurman et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the media, including conventional and digital platforms, can influence public opinion and increase awareness of the significance of multicultural education (Kim, 2020; Nurman et al., 2022). With its broad reach and real-time nature, the media may generate and transmit information about inclusivity and cultural diversity and serve as an effective campaign tool for advocating positive messages about cultural diversity in educational settings.

The penta helix is not meant to replace existing models; instead, it enhances them by introducing a layer of cross-sectoral coordination essential for regions characterized by cultural diversity and complex governmental structures. For instance, Banks' (2015) five-dimension model and Byram's (1997) intercultural competence model emphasize interpersonal relations, the integration of teaching content, the promotion of equity, the reduction of prejudice, the enhancement of cultural awareness, and the empowerment of school culture. However, these models have limitations in Southeast Asia as they primarily emphasize reforms within the formal education system. The penta helix model enhances these two models by broadening reforms in educational institutions while also engaging the media, community (including religious and Indigenous communities), and business sectors, thereby facilitating a multisectoral transformation (Husnah et al., 2024; Sudiana et al., 2020). The resonance of the proposed model within the region is particularly evident in the context of the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, where education is deeply rooted in religious and community traditions (del Castillo & Cacho, 2024; Patras et al., 2022). Consequently, community and religious leaders significantly influence school culture and curriculum development. A multisectoral approach like that illustrated in the penta helix model can ensure that no single narrative dominates and fosters inclusive stakeholder engagement.

Nevertheless, this model is not a universal solution that can address every problem. We can evaluate at least two drawbacks that the region may face. Firstly, countries in Southeast Asia are not yet economically and infrastructurally equal (Enzmann & Moesli, 2022). The implementation of penta helix collaboration may be hindered by the fact that some rural areas within the region still have limited digital infrastructure, and penta helix collaboration now heavily relies on online platforms. Additionally, sectoral politics and patronage remain significant factors. In certain Southeast Asian nations, including Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos, significant political control (Kenney-Lazar & Mark, 2021) may inhibit academic freedom and restrict the participation of various social elements outlined in the penta helix model.

This initiative is challenging to implement all at once within a single region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) serves as a regional organization in Southeast Asia, akin to the European Union's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), focusing on cultural diversity. It is recommended that the ASCC act as a

coordinating entity to gradually promote and sustain the implementation of the penta helix model in strengthening multicultural education across the region. While this review acknowledges that current scholarly discourse is predominantly centered on major Southeast Asian nations, leaving contexts like Timor-Leste and Cambodia underrepresented, the potential for growth and development through a penta helix collaboration model remains promising for the entire region. There is hope that these challenges can be mitigated as the digital infrastructure in the region improves and its political landscape evolves. The penta helix approach has immense potential to foster a strong collaboration in promoting multicultural education in Southeast Asia. Indeed, the goal of collaboration among the government, academia, industry, community, and media is an encouraging sign for the future of the region.

### Conclusion

The thematic review of multicultural education initiatives in Southeast Asia reveals key opportunities and challenges associated with implementing such programs from a broader regional perspective. The challenges offer multiple lessons that will be helpful in the establishment of future multicultural education initiatives in the Southeast Asian region. This thematic review demonstrates the continuous curriculum development and the incorporation of multicultural values. It also highlights how the curriculum may be customized by any member country within the Southeast Asian region to foster unity in diversity.

The generated themes of this study revealed that, despite the existing barriers, Southeast Asia has made commendable strides in fostering a more inclusive and culturally sensitive educational landscape. These efforts involve practical activities and adjustments to educational policies, emphasizing diversity within the learning environment. In order to facilitate the dissemination of practical knowledge regarding multicultural education, the authors recommend that a regional network of educators, industry professionals, and communities be established. Furthermore, efforts should be made to strengthen synergies between local stakeholders in coordination with the education ministries in each country. The penta helix model, with its multisectoral collaborative approach involving the government, industry, academia, community, and the media, holds great promise in fostering an even more inclusive educational landscape in the region. The noble goal of creating a more harmonious and fair educational experience for everyone can be accomplished if the education stakeholders work hand in hand to recognize and capitalize on the richness of multiculturalism in the region.

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