

Elementary School Curriculum Structure in Southeast Asia: A Comparison of the Indonesian and Philippine Education Systems

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ABSTRACT

Education in Southeast Asian countries continues to evolve in line with the demands of globalization and the need for competitive human resources. Indonesia and the Philippines are two countries that place significant emphasis on developing basic education as a foundation for developing 21st-century competencies. Indonesia is currently implementing the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes learning flexibility, differentiated learning, and strengthening student character through the Pancasila Student Profile. Meanwhile, the Philippines implements the K-12 curriculum designed to align the national education system with international standards and prepare graduates for continuing their education and entering the workforce. This study aims to analyze and compare the structure of elementary school curricula in Indonesia and the Philippines, including educational objectives, subject structure, learning load, and competency orientation. The method used is a comparative study with a qualitative approach through an analysis of curriculum policy documents in both countries. The results of the study indicate that although both curricula share the same goal of improving the quality of basic education, there are significant differences in the emphasis on curriculum flexibility, learning approaches, and orientation to learning outcomes. These findings are expected to serve as reflection and reference material in the development of elementary education curriculum policies in the Southeast Asian region.



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A. INTRODUCTION

The development of education in the era of globalization requires every country to prepare superior, adaptive human resources capable of competing globally. Basic education plays a strategic role because it is the main foundation in developing students' cognitive abilities, skills, and character. Educational policies at the elementary school level need to be systematically designed through a curriculum that is relevant to the needs of the times and the national context of each country. The curriculum serves as the main framework that guides learning in schools (Marsela, et.al, 2022; Djamaluddin, 2014; Riznaini, et.al, 2025). The curriculum is a crucial part of the education system, determining the objectives, materials, and learning strategies for each level of education. The curriculum not only covers the subjects to be taught but also reflects the educational philosophy, national vision, and needs.

Indonesia currently implements the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes flexible learning, developing student potential according to interests and needs, and strengthening character education through the Pancasila Student Profile. This curriculum provides greater space for educational units and teachers to design contextual, meaningful, and student-centered learning. Meanwhile, the Philippines is implementing the K-12 curriculum as a form of educational reform aimed at aligning the national education system with international standards and preparing graduates to continue their education to a higher level or enter the workforce. Therefore, comparing curricula between countries can provide a better understanding of the methods used to improve educational quality. As developing countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines share many similarities in social, cultural, and colonial histories. However, there are quite striking differences between the educational systems and curriculum structures implemented.

In both countries, basic education is the primary focus of human development because this level serves as the foundation for building children's affective, cognitive, and psychomotor abilities. Indonesia uses the Independent Curriculum, formerly known as the 2013 Curriculum, which emphasizes competency-oriented and differentiated learning, adapting to the needs of the times, and fostering independence (Nadira, Sarinah, & Juanda, 2023; Faiz & Kurniawaty, 2020; Faiz, et.al., 2022; Yunita, et.al., 2023; Johar, 2023). Meanwhile, the Philippines currently uses the K to 12 Curriculum (K to 12 Gabay Pangkurikulum FILIPINO, 2016). This curriculum extends the basic education period to twelve years and emphasizes outcomes-based learning. A comparative analysis of the curriculum structures of the two countries can show how each country responds to the challenges of globalization, technological advancement, and changes in societal needs. The purpose of this study is to comprehensively analyze the structure of the basic education curriculum in Indonesia and the Philippines. This research is expected to improve understanding of various education systems and enable the development of curriculum policies that are more appropriate, inclusive, and relevant to the challenges of the 21st century.

This study contributes to the comparative analysis of Indonesia's Independent Curriculum and the Philippines' K-12 Curriculum by highlighting differences in educational philosophy, curriculum orientation, and policy implementation. Future research is recommended to further explore the philosophical foundations underlying curriculum reforms and how these foundations shape educational goals, character development, and learner autonomy. In addition, studies should investigate the integration of multiliteracy competencies, including digital, information, media, and cultural literacy within curriculum frameworks to address the demands of 21st-century learning. Further comparative research is also needed to examine how curriculum policies respond to rapid technological advancement, artificial intelligence, and digital transformation, thereby providing evidence-based recommendations for the development of adaptive, inclusive, and future-oriented educational policies.

B. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a comparative study design within the framework of comparative education studies. This approach was chosen because the research focuses on an in-depth understanding of the policies and structure of the elementary school curriculum applied in two countries with different educational systems, namely Indonesia and the Philippines. Comparative qualitative research allows researchers to examine the differences and similarities in educational policies

contextually and holistically without the intention of testing hypotheses, but rather to interpret policy phenomena based on relevant scientific documents and studies (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Miles et al., 2020). The type of research used is library research, with the primary data source being official curriculum policy documents.

Primary data includes the Merdeka Curriculum documents for elementary schools in Indonesia and the K-12 Curriculum documents for elementary schools in the Philippines, issued by the respective education authorities (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Secondary data were obtained from national and international journal articles published between 2020 and 2025, scientific books, and research reports relevant to the topics of curriculum development, elementary education, and comparative education. Data sources were selected selectively, considering aspects of credibility, relevance, and recency of publications to ensure strong academic validity (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data collection was conducted using documentation study techniques, namely by systematically reviewing the contents of curriculum documents and the results of previous research. Documents were analyzed to identify structural aspects of the curriculum, including educational objectives, subject structure, learning load, learning approaches, and the orientation of the competencies developed. Next, the collected data were analyzed using content analysis with the stages of data reduction, categorization, and interpretation of meaning to identify patterns and trends in curriculum policy (Miles et al., 2020). A comparative analysis was conducted to reveal the similarities and differences in the structure of the elementary school curriculum between Indonesia and the Philippines and their implications for student competency development, as suggested in modern comparative education studies (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, namely by comparing information obtained from policy documents with research findings from various national and international journals. This triangulation aims to increase the credibility and consistency of research findings so that the analysis results are not merely subjective but supported by strong scientific evidence (Miles et al., 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thus, the research results are expected to provide meaningful academic contributions and relevant policy recommendations for the development of basic education curricula in the Southeast Asian region.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The structure of the Merdeka curriculum for elementary schools in Indonesia

The curriculum structure for elementary schools/Islamic elementary schools is divided into three phases: a) Phase A covers grades I and II; b) Phase B covers grades III and IV; c) Phase C covers grades V and VI. Learning materials are subject-based. The composition of the learning load in elementary schools/Islamic elementary schools is divided into two parts, namely: a) integrated learning in the curriculum; and b) Pancasila character strengthening projects for students, which are allocated approximately twenty percent of the total learning load each year.

Table 1.Elementary school curriculum structure

Subjects	Intracurricular Strengthening Allocation per Year (Week)	Allocation of Pancasila Student Profile Projects per Year	JP per Year
Islamic Religious Education and Character Education*	108 (3)	36	144
Christian Religious Education and Character Education*	108 (3)	36	144
Catholic Religious Education and Character Education*	108 (3)	36	144
Buddhist Religious Education and Character Education*	108 (3)	36	144
Hindu Religious Education and Character Education*	108 (3)	36	144
Confucian Religious Education and Character Education*	108 (3)	36	144
Pancasila Education	144 (4)	36	180
Indonesian	216 (6)	72	288
Mathematics	144 (4)	36	180
Physical Education, Sports and Health	108 (3)	36	144
Arts and Culture**:	108 (3)	36	144
1. Music Art			
2. Art			
3. Theater Arts			
4. Dance Art			
<i>English</i>	72 (2)***	-	72***
<i>Local content</i>	72 (2) ***	-	72***
Total****:	828 (23)	252	1080

Information:

* Followed by students according to their respective religions.

** Educational units provide at least 1 (one) type of art (Music, Fine Arts, Theater, and/or Dance). Students choose 1 (one) type of art (Music, Fine Arts, Theater, or Dance).

***Maximum 2 (two) JP per week or 72 (seventy two) JP per year as an elective subject.

****Total JP does not include English subjects, local content, and/or additional subjects provided by educational units.

In Indonesia, the educational philosophy is based on the values of Pancasila and national culture, which prioritize the development of students' character, morals, and personality as the primary goal of education. Education is not solely directed at academic achievement, but also at developing attitudes, values, and behaviors that reflect national identity. In contrast, the Philippine education system tends to be oriented toward measurable learning outcomes, with a strong emphasis on literacy, numeracy, and academic achievement as indicators of educational success. This focus is reflected in the curriculum, evaluation system, and education policies, which place greater emphasis on basic competencies and student readiness to face global demands. These philosophical differences are at the root of structural variations in curriculum design, learning strategies, and assessment systems in the two countries, and demonstrate how the core values embraced by a nation influence the direction and goals of education.

In Indonesia, the Merdeka Curriculum provides greater flexibility for teachers to design learning activities according to students' needs and local contexts. This flexibility encourages the implementation of student-centered learning, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction. However, several teachers reported challenges related to curriculum understanding, assessment practices, and the integration of technology-supported learning. Differences in access to training programs and digital infrastructure also influence the quality of implementation across schools.

Real-world implementation challenges are crucial factors that must be addressed for effective policy and curriculum design. In Indonesia, the implementation of project-based learning and contextual approaches requires adequate teacher capacity in planning, facilitating, and assessing the learning process and outcomes. In practice, not all teachers have equal professional training and support. This situation has the potential to lead to project learning being merely administrative in nature, lacking meaningful depth. In the Philippines, a major challenge arises in bilingual teaching, which mandates the use of both the mother tongue, Filipino, and English. This often creates difficulties for teachers and students in maintaining consistency in the language of instruction and achieving academic competencies.

2. Curriculum Structure in the Philippines

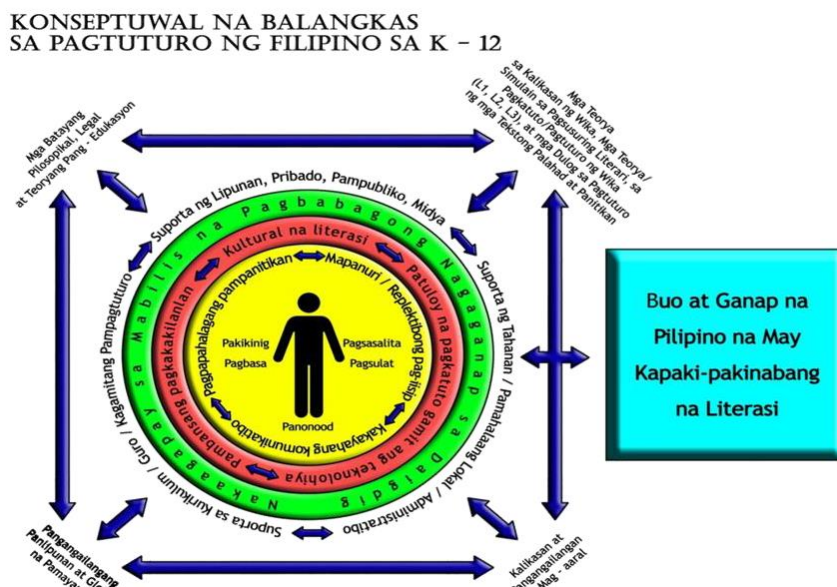


Figure 1.K-12 curriculum structure

The overall goal of the K-12 Curriculum is to develop the whole Filipino person with meaningful literacy. In this regard, the goal of Filipino language instruction is to develop (1) communication skills, (2) reflective/critical thinking, and (3) literary appreciation among students, through reading materials and technology toward the acquisition of national identity, cultural literacy, and continuous learning to keep pace with the rapid changes taking place in the world. To achieve these goals, teachers need teaching materials to support the curriculum that will be sourced from administrative agencies, private and public social institutions, and local governments, the media, and other sectors of society.

Curriculum development takes into account the social needs of local and global communities, as well as the environment and needs of students. Legal requirements are also taken into account in education law, and theories of educational philosophy and language by Jean Piaget (Stages of Learning Development), Leo Vygotsky

(Cooperative Learning), Jerome Bruner (Discovery Learning), Robert Gagne (Heirarchical Learning), David Ausubel (Interactive/Integrated Learning), Cummins (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills-BICS and Cognitive Academic Language Skills-CALPS) and the Philippine national hero, Dr. Jose P. Rizal who said "the hope of the nation lies in the youth". Because Filipino is within the discipline of linguistics, it is based on theories on the nature and learning of language, theories/principles in literacy assessment and language teaching approaches (W1, W2, W3) as well as the teaching of literary works and narrative texts (Department of Education Philippines, 2020).

In the Philippines, the K–12 Curriculum offers a more structured framework that helps teachers align learning outcomes with competency standards and career pathways. Teachers generally perceived the curriculum as providing clearer guidance for instructional planning. Nevertheless, challenges remain in terms of workload, resource availability, and the need for continuous professional development to support innovative teaching practices and digital learning integration.

3. Standard Program for Grades 1-6 in the Philippines

Filipino can be used easily to understand and explain content knowledge, using appropriate and correct words to express one's thoughts, feelings, or experiences while fully respecting the culture of the sender and recipient. The Filipino learning program standards for grades 1–6 are designed as a primary foundation in the development of literacy, communication, and cultural identity of learners. The use of Filipino as the primary language of instruction aims to enable students to understand and explain content knowledge effectively, while developing the ability to express thoughts, feelings, and experiences with appropriate and correct word choices. This approach demonstrates that literacy in the Philippine curriculum is not understood merely as the technical ability to read and write, but as a means of meaningful communication tied to social and cultural contexts (Department of Education Philippines, 2016).

Table 2.Curriculum standards in each class

Class	Standards for Each Class
Preschool	Students demonstrate the ability to express thoughts and feelings in their native language and a readiness to read and write to identify themselves and learn. interact with other people.
1	Students are expected to understand how to express themselves verbally and nonverbally and respond appropriately. They acquire good reading and writing skills for express and relate their own ideas, feelings and experiences to the texts they hear and read according to their level and in relation to their culture.
2	Students are expected to be able to convey the main ideas of the text that has been read or heard, using language skills and reading by composing words correctly and writing well to express and relate their own ideas, feelings and experiences to the text that has been heard and read according to their level and in relation to their culture.
3	Students are expected to be able to convey the main ideas of texts they have read or heard and provide related or equivalent texts, use language skills, read with appropriate vocabulary, and write well using various parts of speech to express and connect their own ideas, feelings, and experiences with texts they have heard and read according to their level and in relation to their culture.
4	Students demonstrate the ability to read, write, and communicate accurately to express knowledge, ideas, and feelings appropriate to their age and culture and participate in the development of society.

5	Students demonstrate communication skills, critical thinking, and literary and cultural appreciation through a variety of local and national texts/reading materials.
6	Students demonstrate communication skills, critical thinking, and an appreciation of language, literature, and culture to contribute to national development.

Based on Table 2, at the lower grade level (grades 1–3), program standards emphasize mastery of basic language skills, such as understanding simple spoken and written texts, recognizing word meanings, and expressing ideas and feelings orally and in writing. Language is used as a tool to build students' initial conceptual understanding and academic readiness. Entering the upper grade level (grades 4–6), program standards evolve toward more complex language use, including the ability to analyze texts, convey ideas coherently, and interpret information by considering communication goals and audiences (Cruz & Bernardo, 2019).

Table 3. Comparison of Indonesian and Philippine Elementary School Curriculum

Aspect	Indonesia	Philippines
Management Body	Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek)	Department of Education (DepEd)
Curriculum Name	Independent Curriculum	K-12 Basic Education Curriculum
Length of Elementary Education	6 Years	6 years
Latest Implementation Year	Independent Curriculum: starting in 2022	K to 12: starting 2012–2013, mandatory since 2016
Elementary Education Level	Elementary School (SD): 6 years	Elementary: Grades 1–6
Language of instruction	Indonesian; can use regional languages in early grades	Mother Tongue (Grade 1–3), then English and Filipino
Core Subjects	Indonesian, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Civics, Physical Education, Arts and Culture, English	Filipino, English, Mathematics, Science, Araling Panlipunan (IPS), Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (PPKn), MAPEH
Characteristics of the Curriculum	- Pancasila Student Profile - Differentiated learning - Student Profile Strengthening Project	Outcomes-based Education (OBE): focus on learning outcomes
Curriculum Approach	Independent Learning: flexible, project-based and competency-based	Outcomes-based Education (OBE): focus on learning outcomes
Evaluation and Assessment	Formative and summative assessment formats; competency-based national assessment	Assessment based on learning competencies and performance tasks

Discussion

Literacy program standards in the Philippines emphasize the use of Filipino as the primary tool for effectively understanding, expressing, and interpreting knowledge, feelings, and experiences. The emphasis on accurate expression, appropriate word usage, and respect for the cultures of both senders and recipients demonstrates that the Philippine curriculum integrates linguistic competence with communicative and cultural competence. This approach aligns with the view that literacy is not only about the technical skills of reading and writing, but also the ability to communicate meaningfully in specific social and cultural contexts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2020; Rowsell & Morrell, 2020; Education, 2016; Department of Education, 2019). Indonesia emphasizes value- and character-based literacy, while the Philippines places greater emphasis on literacy as an academic competency and a tool for social mobility, thus providing a strong theoretical basis and relevance for developing educational policies.

The gradual development of literacy from Grades K–3 to Grades 4–6. In the early stages, students are guided to understand simple spoken and written texts and express meaning and feelings effectively. As they enter the upper grades, these skills develop into enthusiasm for exploring texts and communicating ideas in more complex ways. This developmental pattern is consistent with the principle of spiral progression that underpins the Philippine curriculum, namely, competencies are developed gradually from simple to complex (Cruz & Bernardo, 2019).

A fundamental difference in curriculum structure is that Indonesia places greater emphasis on flexibility and developing student profiles as fundamental character traits. Meanwhile, the Philippines employs an Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) approach, which emphasizes standardized learning outcomes across regions (Tan & Reyes, 2022). The OBE approach aims to ensure equitable learning quality. Differences are also evident in the language of instruction. Indonesia offers the option of using regional languages in early grades, while the Philippines mandates the use of mother tongues nationwide until grade 3. Research shows that the use of mother tongues in early literacy improves conceptual understanding and reading skills (Delos Santos, 2021).

Indonesia's core subjects integrate Natural Sciences and Social Sciences into Science, while the Philippines separates Araling Panlipunan and Science to maintain disciplinary depth. Studies suggest that integrating subject areas like Science promotes holistic and contextual learning (Mulyasa, 2022), while separating subjects can support deeper mastery of specific concepts (Gonzales, 2020). The pedagogical approach is a key differentiator. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes project-based learning, differentiation, and teacher flexibility, while the Philippines' approach is more structured with standardized assessment rubrics, directed worksheets, and performance tasks. The Indonesian approach aligns with a constructivist learning model, while the Philippines' approach aligns with a standards-based pedagogy (Black & Wiliam, 2018). Indonesia focuses more on contextual projects and local cultural integration, while the Philippines places greater emphasis on data analysis, graphics, and structured academic texts (Cruz & Bernardo, 2019).

Regarding teacher readiness, the findings suggest that successful curriculum implementation requires not only pedagogical competence but also digital literacy, curriculum literacy, and the ability to facilitate multiliteracy learning environments. Teachers who demonstrated stronger understanding of curriculum goals and greater

confidence in using digital technologies were more likely to implement learner-centered approaches and foster higher-order thinking skills among students.

The analysis further indicates that both curricula have the potential to enhance students' literacy development and 21st-century competencies. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes literacy through contextual and project-based learning experiences that support critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. Similarly, the Philippine K-12 Curriculum promotes literacy and competency development through structured learning progressions and competency-based instruction. However, the extent of these outcomes largely depends on implementation quality, teacher preparedness, and the availability of supporting resources.

From a multiliteracy perspective, both curricula increasingly recognize the importance of digital, information, media, and cultural literacy. These competencies are essential for preparing students to participate effectively in a rapidly changing digital society. The findings suggest that curriculum policies should be accompanied by sustained teacher professional development programs, improved technological infrastructure, and ongoing evaluation mechanisms to ensure that intended learning outcomes are successfully achieved. These results demonstrate that curriculum reform should not be viewed solely as a policy initiative but as a comprehensive educational process involving curriculum design, teacher readiness, school support systems, and student learning outcomes. Therefore, strengthening implementation capacity is as important as developing curriculum frameworks themselves in achieving educational goals and preparing students for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

The main novelty of this research lies in the comparative analysis of the Indonesian and Philippine literacy curricula, which not only compares formal structures and policies but also examines philosophical orientations, learning approaches, and their implications for literacy practices in schools. Furthermore, this research expands on this by exploring the relationship between multiliteracies and the 21st-century digital context, specifically how both curricula respond to technological developments, digital literacy, and the demands of students' global competencies. Another novel aspect lies in the emphasis on literacy inclusivity, by analyzing the extent to which the Indonesian and Philippine curricula accommodate the needs of students in remote areas, minority language speakers, and students with special needs. With this approach, this research contributes not only to enriching the theoretical and empirical literature on literacy curricula in Southeast Asia but also provides a conceptual foundation for the development of more contextual, digital, and inclusive curriculum policies.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The results show that although the educational goals of both countries are the same: to produce intelligent, character-driven students who are ready to face the challenges of the 21st century, there are significant differences in curriculum structure, learning methods, and implementation policies. The Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) created in Indonesia focuses on learning flexibility, greater autonomy for schools and teachers, and Pancasila-based student profiles to foster character. On the other hand, the Philippines has implemented a K-12 curriculum that emphasizes global alignment. The Philippine curriculum tends to be more structured in developing early

career paths, while the Indonesian curriculum places more emphasis on Independent Learning (Merdeka Belajar) and strengthening cultural values.

Future research is recommended to investigate the effectiveness of the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia and the K-12 Curriculum in the Philippines through empirical studies involving students, teachers, and schools. Further studies may also examine the impact of both curricula on 21st-century skills, character development, and career readiness. In addition, broader comparative studies involving other Southeast Asian countries could provide valuable insights for curriculum improvement and educational policy development.

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