

Comparative Study of Educational Policy Implementation in Indonesia and Malaysia: A Focus on Curriculum Design and Teacher Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a comparative analysis of educational policy implementation in Indonesia and Malaysia, with a specific focus on curriculum design and teacher autonomy. It addresses four key research questions related to the philosophy of curriculum frameworks, institutional and cultural conditions influencing policy enactment, teacher agency in practice, and hybrid practices in border regions like Lombok–Sabah. Employing a literature review (library research) method, the study systematically synthesized peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, and empirical studies published between 2013 and 2024. Thematic analysis was conducted using both deductive and inductive coding techniques, guided by qualitative content analysis methodology. Findings indicate that while both countries promote teacher autonomy at the policy level, Malaysia demonstrates stronger alignment between curricular goals and institutional support through mechanisms such as School-Based Assessment (SBA), Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and leadership mentoring. Indonesia, by contrast, exhibits a symbolic form of autonomy under centralized policy structures, uneven teacher training access, and limited school-level capacity. In border regions like Lombok–Sabah, teachers exhibit high levels of contextual agency by integrating local culture, bilingual instruction, and grassroots collaboration into curriculum practice—demonstrating autonomy driven by necessity rather than policy. This research highlights the critical role of structural support, cultural responsiveness, and decentralization in actualizing teacher autonomy. It offers practical insights for education policymakers and curriculum developers seeking to create inclusive, adaptive, and teacher-empowering systems across diverse educational settings.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, curriculum reform has been at the forefront of national education agendas as governments seek to equip students with skills relevant to the 21st century. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia have both pursued significant educational policy transformations. These reforms not only aim to modernize curriculum content but also to reconfigure the role of teachers as autonomous professionals. The Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) in Indonesia was designed to grant greater flexibility to teachers and promote student-centered learning.

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However, its implementation continues to face challenges related to infrastructure, centralized governance, and uneven teacher capacity (Firmansyah, 2023; Suryani, 2021; Ainissyifa et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013–2025 has emphasized decentralization and teacher empowerment through structured professional development and school-based decision-making mechanisms (Noraini & Aziz, 2022; Rahim et al., 2020). Malaysian educators benefit from stronger institutional support, which significantly influences their autonomy and decision-making in classrooms (Hashim & Ahmad, 2021). While both nations highlight the importance of 21st-century skills, their strategies for operationalizing these goals differ significantly (Raniya et al., 2022). In addition, cultural and administrative traditions play a critical role in shaping how teachers enact their autonomy within the bounds of national curricula.

Prior research underscores the centrality of teacher agency in the success of curriculum reforms. Jenkins (2019) asserts that agency involves not only freedom but also the ability to act purposefully within structural constraints. Studies from Malaysia have shown that professional learning communities and leadership support are essential for developing such agency (Rahim et al., 2020; Saefudin et al., 2024), while Indonesian reforms often struggle with policy-practice dissonance and a culture of compliance (Pratiwi et al., 2020; Ainissyifa et al., 2024). Moreover, policy coherence and system alignment—stronger in Malaysia than in Indonesia—play a significant role in implementation effectiveness (Sukarno et al., 2024). In hybrid settings like the Indonesia–Malaysia border region, curriculum design often reflects localized adaptations that blend national expectations with contextual realities (Okta & Putra, 2023).

Despite these contributions, there is a notable lack of comparative research that systematically analyzes how curriculum policy and teacher autonomy intersect in these two countries. Most existing studies focus either on curriculum structure or teacher development in isolation, rather than examining how policy, curriculum design, and teacher agency function as interconnected elements. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how education systems can empower teachers to be not just policy implementers, but curriculum designers and decision-makers (Priestley et al., 2012; Ahmad & Hassan, 2023).

The debate over curriculum control and teacher agency in both Indonesia and Malaysia reflects deeper historical and political trajectories. In Indonesia, curriculum centralization has been a legacy of the post-colonial state's desire to maintain national unity, often at the expense of localized educational innovation. The frequent top-down reforms have placed teachers in a reactive position, where their professional judgment is secondary to ministerial directives (Suryani, 2021). In contrast, Malaysia has invested in gradually empowering schools through initiatives such as school-based assessment and professional learning communities, indicating a shift toward decentralization and participatory reform (Noraini & Aziz, 2022; Rahim et al., 2020).

However, autonomy in practice is far from uniform within either system. In Indonesia, teacher decision-making is still shaped by deeply rooted bureaucratic structures, which often lead to compliance-oriented behavior rather than innovation (Ainissyifa et al., 2024). Moreover, rural schools continue to face limitations in accessing training, digital infrastructure, and pedagogical support—further constraining their capacity to exercise professional discretion. In Malaysia, while systemic support is generally more robust, the actual degree of autonomy varies depending on school leadership and local policy interpretation (Hashim & Ahmad, 2021).

In both contexts, there is growing recognition that effective curriculum reform cannot be achieved solely through policy mandates. Instead, reform must be enacted through empowered teachers who are well-supported and trusted to adapt curricula to meet student needs. This perspective is reinforced by comparative findings that highlight the critical role of teacher agency

in mediating curriculum intent and classroom realities (Pratiwi et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2019). In Malaysia, teacher-led formative assessments and classroom innovation have been encouraged within the policy framework, while in Indonesia, such practices often remain limited to pilot programs or elite institutions (Sukarno et al., 2024).

Notably, border regions between the two countries offer a unique lens through which to view curriculum dynamics. In areas such as Kalimantan and Sabah, cross-cultural exchange and policy hybridity have led to the emergence of adaptive curriculum practices that respond to multilingualism, cultural identity, and socio-economic disparity (Okta & Putra, 2023). These settings challenge the binary of centralized versus decentralized models and demonstrate how teacher agency can flourish when supported by localized policy flexibility and contextual understanding.

Moreover, in both Indonesia and Malaysia, Islamic education serves as a parallel domain where debates on curriculum integration and teacher authority are particularly pronounced. As noted by Ahmad and Hassan (2023), the future of Islamic education in both countries hinges on the ability to integrate classical Islamic heritage (*turāth*) with contemporary demands without becoming ideologically rigid. This challenge mirrors the broader issue in general education: the need for teachers who are capable of interpreting policy frameworks critically, responding flexibly, and maintaining cultural and ethical fidelity amidst rapid educational change.

Based on the literature and contextual analysis above, this study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) How do the curriculum design principles of Indonesia and Malaysia reflect differing approaches to teacher autonomy?; (2) What are the institutional, cultural, and structural factors that influence the implementation of educational policy and curriculum in both countries?; (3) How is teacher agency exercised and supported in the practical enactment of national curriculum policies in Indonesia and Malaysia?; and (4) How do teachers in border regions, such as Lombok–Sabah, adapt national curriculum policies through hybrid and context-sensitive practices?

In accordance with the above research problems, the objectives of this study are: (1) To compare the curriculum frameworks of Indonesia and Malaysia, particularly their implications for teacher autonomy; (2) To identify key factors—such as leadership, infrastructure, and professional development—that influence policy implementation in both contexts; (3) To explore the lived experiences of teachers in interpreting and applying curriculum policy within their respective educational systems; and (4) To analyze how teachers in cross-border or peripheral regions implement hybrid curricular strategies in response to local cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts.

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of comparative education literature by integrating policy analysis, curriculum design, teacher autonomy, and contextual adaptation into a unified analytical framework. Practically, the findings are expected to inform policymakers, curriculum developers, and educational leaders about the conditions that enable or hinder effective curriculum implementation. By centering teacher perspectives—including those in under-researched border regions—this research advocates for more inclusive and context-sensitive reforms. It emphasizes the importance of empowering teachers as curriculum designers, particularly in diverse and complex settings like Lombok–Sabah, where hybrid educational practices emerge as adaptive solutions. Ultimately, the study aims to support the development of responsive education systems where teacher agency is both recognized and supported.

METHOD

This research employed a library research method to conduct a comparative analysis of educational policy implementation in Indonesia and Malaysia, with a specific focus on curriculum design and teacher autonomy. This method was selected to systematically collect, review, and analyze existing scholarly literature, government policy documents, and journal articles relevant to the topic (Zed, 2004). The approach allowed the researcher to synthesize conceptual frameworks, empirical findings, and policy outcomes drawn from reputable academic sources and official publications.

The study analyzed peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and government blueprints published between 2013 and 2024. Selection criteria included relevance to the research theme, publication in reputable journals, and availability of DOIs for source verification. The inclusion of national documents such as the Kurikulum Merdeka (Indonesia) and the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 ensured alignment with policy context. Articles that addressed teacher agency, curriculum implementation, decentralization, and professional development in both countries were prioritized (Rahim et al., 2020; Noraini & Aziz, 2022).

Data were collected through systematic reading and thematic categorization, focusing on five core themes: curriculum reform, teacher autonomy, implementation barriers, institutional support, and educational policy coherence. Each document was read thoroughly, annotated, and coded based on these themes, following a qualitative content analysis framework (Krippendorff, 2018). Comparative analysis was then conducted to identify similarities, differences, and emerging patterns across Indonesian and Malaysian educational contexts (Sukarno et al., 2024; Okta & Putra, 2023).

The data analysis followed a deductive-inductive strategy. Deductive elements were guided by existing theoretical perspectives on curriculum and autonomy, while inductive interpretation allowed insights to emerge from the texts themselves (Jenkins, 2019). Synthesis and comparison were used to critically examine how national education policies influence curriculum practice and the role of teachers as autonomous agents in both systems.

To ensure the validity of the literature review process, sources were triangulated from multiple databases such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, and official government portals. Recent studies (Ainissyifa et al., 2024; Raniya et al., 2022) were cross-referenced with foundational educational theories to provide depth and relevance. The use of recent, DOI-indexed journal articles and classic scholarly texts ensured both the contemporaneity and theoretical soundness of the study.

RESULTS

1. Divergent Curriculum Design Principles and Approaches to Teacher Autonomy

The analysis found that Indonesia and Malaysia adopt different curricular philosophies that distinctly shape teacher autonomy. The Indonesian Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes flexibility and differentiation, theoretically granting teachers autonomy in determining lesson content, pedagogy, and assessment methods (Firmansyah, 2023). However, implementation remains uneven due to centralized policy structures, lack of teacher training, and insufficient school infrastructure (Suryani, 2021; Ainissyifa et al., 2024). In contrast, Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013–2025 integrates curriculum reform with systemic teacher support mechanisms—such as School-Based Assessment (SBA) and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)—which allow greater discretion and collaborative autonomy in classrooms (Noraini & Aziz, 2022; Rahim et al., 2020).

These differences reveal that while both systems promote teacher autonomy at the policy level, Malaysia's curriculum design is more coherently aligned with mechanisms that foster

autonomy in practice. Malaysia’s curriculum grants teachers greater agency not just in pedagogy, but also in curriculum interpretation and contextualization (Hashim & Ahmad, 2021). Meanwhile, Indonesian educators frequently operate within a compliance-based culture, leading to symbolic autonomy rather than authentic instructional innovation (Pratiwi et al., 2020).

This table summarizes the key differences and similarities between Indonesia and Malaysia in terms of curriculum policy, teacher autonomy, and institutional conditions.

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Curriculum Policy and Teacher Autonomy

| Dimension | Indonesia | Malaysia |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Curriculum Model | Kurikulum Merdeka (flexible, student-centered) | Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (systematic) |
| Teacher Autonomy Policy | Theoretical autonomy; limited in practice | Structured autonomy with support mechanisms |
| Institutional Support | Weak, especially in rural areas | Strong via leadership and PLCs |
| Implementation Culture | Centralized, compliance-oriented | Decentralized, participatory |
| Teacher Training Access | Uneven, especially in remote areas | Regular, embedded in national strategy |
| Classroom Innovation | Emerging in pilot schools | More widespread and supported |

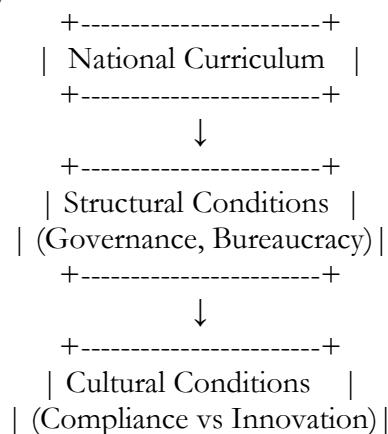
Table 1 compares curriculum policy and teacher autonomy in Indonesia and Malaysia. Indonesia promotes flexibility through Kurikulum Merdeka, but faces weak support and centralized control. In contrast, Malaysia’s Education Blueprint combines structured teacher autonomy with strong leadership, regular training, and a participatory culture—making teacher innovation and autonomy more achievable in practice.

2. Institutional, Cultural, and Structural Influences

Teacher autonomy is deeply affected by institutional and cultural conditions in both countries. In Indonesia, challenges include top-down mandates, bureaucratic rigidity, digital infrastructure gaps, and uneven access to capacity-building programs, especially in rural schools (Firmansyah, 2023; Ainissyifa et al., 2024). These conditions restrict teachers’ ability to implement the Merdeka Curriculum independently and creatively.

In Malaysia, while central policies remain prescriptive in broad objectives, school-level leadership and supportive professional environments have allowed teachers to exercise greater agency (Rahim et al., 2020). Factors such as principal leadership, regional education office support, and collaborative culture strongly influence the level of autonomy experienced by teachers (Hashim & Ahmad, 2021). Thus, teacher agency is contextually shaped: stronger in Malaysian urban schools with well-resourced leadership, and weaker in Indonesian schools with limited institutional autonomy and historical centralization (Sukarno et al., 2024).

This diagram maps the structural, cultural, and institutional factors affecting the implementation of teacher autonomy in both countries.



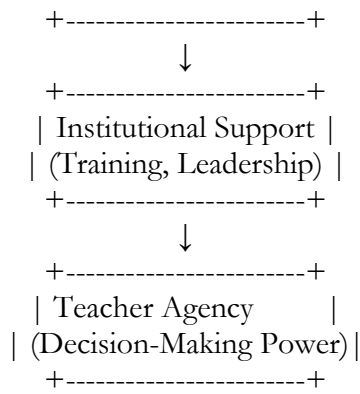


Figure 1. Influencing Factors on Teacher Autonomy

This diagram illustrates the layered factors that influence teacher autonomy in both Indonesia and Malaysia. At the top, the National Curriculum sets the policy framework. Its implementation is shaped by structural conditions such as governance systems and bureaucratic procedures. These structures, in turn, interact with cultural conditions, including norms of compliance or openness to innovation. The degree of institutional support—through training and leadership—either strengthens or weakens the development of teacher agency, defined as teachers’ ability to make professional, context-based decisions in the classroom. This sequential flow highlights how teacher autonomy is not only a policy issue but a product of interrelated systemic, cultural, and institutional factors.

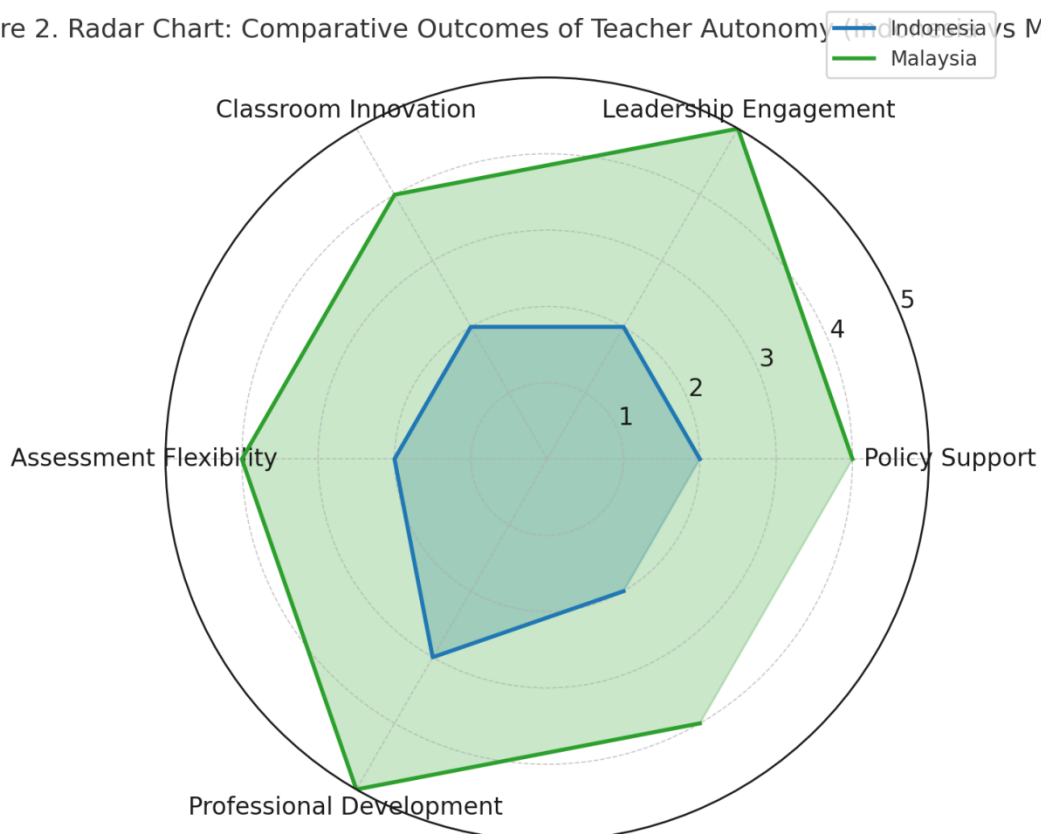
3. Teacher Agency in Practice

The review confirmed that teacher agency is not merely about freedom from regulation, but the ability to make context-sensitive professional decisions. In Malaysia, autonomy is operationalized through strategies like differentiated instruction, formative assessment design, and reflective teaching—supported by regular training and leadership mentorship (Saefudin et al., 2024). Teachers are involved in curriculum decision-making and adapt lessons to suit diverse student needs.

In contrast, Indonesian teachers report limited opportunities for such agency, especially in public schools without adequate training or principal support. Even when granted autonomy, many teachers hesitate to innovate due to a culture of fear or lack of pedagogical models (Pratiwi et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2019). Moreover, autonomy without structured support often leads to burnout or superficial implementation, particularly when reform expectations outpace professional readiness (Naufalin et al., 2023).

To illustrate the practical implications of curriculum policies on teacher autonomy, Figure 2 presents a radar chart comparing Indonesia and Malaysia across five outcome categories. These categories—policy support, leadership engagement, classroom innovation, assessment flexibility, and professional development—represent key domains through which teacher agency is shaped and enacted in both countries.

Figure 2. Radar Chart: Comparative Outcomes of Teacher Autonomy (Indonesia vs Malaysia)



This radar chart provides a visual comparison of teacher autonomy outcomes between Indonesia and Malaysia, based on five key categories: policy support, leadership engagement, classroom innovation, assessment flexibility, and professional development—each rated on a scale from 0 (weak) to 5 (strong). The chart reveals that Indonesia demonstrates consistently lower scores across all categories, highlighting ongoing challenges related to centralized governance, uneven professional development, and limited support for classroom-level decision-making. In contrast, Malaysia scores significantly higher in all dimensions—particularly in leadership engagement and professional development—showcasing the positive effects of structured decentralization, school-based support systems, and sustained investment in teacher empowerment. Overall, this figure illustrates how differing curriculum policy frameworks directly influence the extent and quality of teacher autonomy in each national context.

4. Border Region Adaptations and Hybrid Practices

Evidence from border regions, particularly areas like Lombok–Sabah, reveals how teachers navigate complex educational landscapes through hybrid curriculum practices. These regions operate under dual influences—Indonesian and Malaysian educational frameworks—resulting in unique pedagogical innovations. Educators in these areas frequently merge national curriculum standards with local cultural values, indigenous languages, and the specific socio-economic realities of border communities (Okta & Putra, 2023). For example, local educators integrate pantun Sasak and Malay oral traditions into literacy activities, employ thematic learning grounded in maritime and agrarian life, and develop bilingual modules that reflect the multilingual identities of their students.

Despite facing infrastructural limitations and limited oversight, teachers demonstrate high levels of professional autonomy and adaptive creativity. Many take initiative in crafting localized teaching materials, designing thematic units, and forming informal teacher networks that span across the border. This adaptive practice illustrates how teacher agency can emerge strongly in resource-constrained but contextually rich environments.

What becomes evident in these regions is that curriculum responsiveness often stems not from top-down policy reforms, but from grassroots-level professionalism and cultural immersion. In Lombok–Sabah contexts, teachers act as co-constructors of education, shaping the curriculum to reflect and serve their communities more effectively.

Hence, these border schools function as living laboratories for curriculum reform—spaces where autonomy, cultural relevance, and inclusion are not just policy aspirations but daily practices. Their experiences offer valuable insights into how flexible curriculum implementation, when anchored in local context and trust in teacher capacity, can foster educational equity and innovation in peripheral regions.

Table 2 summarizes key findings from the analysis of curriculum adaptations and teacher practices in the Lombok–Sabah border region. It presents how teachers respond to complex educational demands through culturally grounded, context-sensitive innovations.

Table 2. Curriculum Practices and Teacher Agency in Lombok–Sabah Border Regions

| Dimension | Observed Practices / Insights |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Curricular Influence | Hybrid curriculum combining Indonesian and Malaysian national standards with local cultural inputs. |
| Local Cultural Integration | Use of <i>pantun Sasak</i> , Malay oral traditions, and thematic learning based on maritime and agrarian life. |
| Language Practices | Development of bilingual modules reflecting multilingual student populations (Bahasa Indonesia, Malay, Sasak). |
| Infrastructure & Oversight | Limited infrastructure and formal supervision, especially in rural or peripheral areas. |
| Teacher Autonomy | High professional autonomy driven by necessity; teachers create localized materials and adapt content independently. |
| Collaboration Networks | Informal cross-border teacher collaborations; grassroots professional networks facilitate innovation. |
| Curriculum Responsiveness | Emerges from bottom-up adaptation rather than top-down policy; deeply tied to cultural immersion and community engagement. |
| Significance of Practice | Border schools act as "living laboratories" for inclusive curriculum reform, highlighting the potential of trust-based, locally led educational innovation. |

This table illustrates how teachers in Lombok–Sabah navigate between national curriculum mandates and local realities. Despite infrastructural constraints and limited oversight, they demonstrate high levels of autonomy by integrating indigenous knowledge, using bilingual approaches, and forming informal professional networks. These practices highlight the critical role of teacher agency and local context in shaping responsive and inclusive curriculum implementation at the periphery.

DISCUSSION

1. Analysis of Results

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive response to all four research questions, offering nuanced insights into how educational policy implementation in Indonesia and Malaysia affects teacher autonomy and curriculum enactment.

a. The Curriculum Design Principles Of Indonesia And Malaysia Reflect Differing Approaches To Teacher Autonomy

The results demonstrate that Indonesia and Malaysia adopt distinct curriculum philosophies with divergent implications for teacher autonomy. Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka promotes flexibility and student-centered learning, aiming to empower teachers to make pedagogical and

assessment decisions. However, in practice, this autonomy is often symbolic due to centralized governance, limited infrastructure, and inconsistent professional development (Firmansyah, 2023; Ainissyifa et al., 2024). In contrast, Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013–2025 is grounded in a structured, systemic reform approach that explicitly embeds teacher support through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), School-Based Assessment (SBA), and leadership mentoring (Rahim et al., 2020; Noraini & Aziz, 2022). This results in a more coherent and operationalized form of teacher autonomy.

b. The Institutional, Cultural, And Structural Factors That Influence The Implementation Of Educational Policy And Curriculum In Both Countries

Teacher autonomy in both contexts is shaped by deep-rooted structural and cultural factors. In Indonesia, rigid top-down mandates, weak institutional capacity (especially in rural areas), and a long-standing culture of bureaucratic compliance inhibit teachers' ability to enact curriculum reforms with confidence or creativity (Suryani, 2021; Sukarno et al., 2024). Conversely, in Malaysia, decentralized leadership, investment in school-level capacity building, and a culture of participatory professionalism foster teacher agency. Urban Malaysian schools, in particular, exhibit a strong alignment between curriculum policy and classroom implementation.

c. Teacher Agency Exercised And Supported In The Practical Enactment Of National Curriculum Policies In Indonesia And Malaysia

Teacher agency is most effective when autonomy is matched with institutional support. In Malaysia, teachers routinely adapt instruction based on student needs, design assessments, and participate in collaborative planning—all enabled by continuous training and school leadership engagement (Saefudin et al., 2024). In contrast, Indonesian teachers, particularly in public schools, report limited space for curriculum adaptation. Even when granted formal autonomy, they often face professional hesitation due to lack of models, support, or fear of deviation from policy expectations (Pratiwi et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2019). This mismatch between policy rhetoric and classroom reality leads to partial or superficial reform outcomes.

d. Teachers In Border Regions, Such As Lombok–Sabah, Adapt National Curriculum Policies Through Hybrid And Context-Sensitive Practices

In border areas like Lombok–Sabah, teachers exhibit unique hybrid pedagogical strategies. These educators operate at the intersection of two national systems and demonstrate strong contextual agency. They merge national curriculum standards with local languages, indigenous knowledge (e.g., *pantun* Sasak and Malay oral traditions), and thematic content relevant to maritime or agrarian livelihoods (Okta & Putra, 2023). Despite minimal oversight and infrastructural gaps, these teachers display adaptive professionalism—designing bilingual modules, co-creating teaching materials, and forming informal networks across the border. This underscores that teacher autonomy, when rooted in local context and trust, can thrive even in structurally disadvantaged settings.

2. Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study are broadly consistent with previous research on the relationship between curriculum frameworks and teacher autonomy. As noted by Jenkins (2019), teacher agency is shaped by the interaction between individual capacity and systemic conditions. This study confirms that Malaysian teachers benefit from institutional mechanisms—such as school-based leadership, structured training, and collaborative networks—that enable them to actualize their agency (Rahim et al., 2020; Saefudin et al., 2024). This aligns with Hashim & Ahmad (2021), who found that autonomy in Malaysia is facilitated by decentralization and sustained professional support.

In contrast, studies in Indonesia have repeatedly highlighted a policy-practice gap, where ambitious reforms like Kurikulum Merdeka are not matched by on-the-ground readiness (Pratiwi et al., 2020; Ainissyifa et al., 2024). The present study adds weight to this claim by showing how symbolic autonomy—where teachers are expected to innovate but lack the conditions to do so—leads to stagnation or superficial implementation (Naufalin et al., 2023).

This study also echoes the conclusions of Okta & Putra (2023) regarding hybrid practices in border regions. The evidence from Lombok–Sabah supports the idea that teachers in these contexts often transcend policy limitations through creative, culturally grounded pedagogical practices. These findings extend the literature by showcasing how peripheral contexts may serve as innovation hubs despite infrastructural challenges.

3. Implications of Findings

Theoretically, this research contributes to comparative education literature by offering a multidimensional analysis that connects curriculum design, institutional conditions, and teacher agency. It advances the understanding that teacher autonomy is not only a professional ideal but a systemic outcome shaped by policies, leadership, and culture.

Practically, the findings suggest that autonomy policies must be accompanied by systemic investments in training, infrastructure, and school leadership to be effective. For policymakers in Indonesia, this calls for a shift from rhetorical flexibility toward structural empowerment—especially in rural schools. For Malaysia, the success of structured support mechanisms underscores the importance of sustaining PLCs and formative assessment strategies.

Furthermore, the adaptive innovations seen in border regions imply that trust in teachers, especially in complex or underserved areas, can produce meaningful curricular transformation. Educational leaders should consider adopting a contextualized decentralization model, where schools are granted flexibility based on local conditions and professional maturity.

4. Limitations of the Study

This study used a literature review (library research) approach, which, while offering broad analytical depth, is limited by the availability and scope of published materials. The analysis is based on secondary data and may not fully capture the lived experiences of teachers, especially in undocumented or informal settings. Another limitation lies in the lack of longitudinal data, which would allow for a better understanding of how teacher autonomy evolves over time. Additionally, most of the reviewed studies are based on urban or accessible regions, with less representation from remote or conflict-affected areas. Finally, the comparative nature of this study means that certain national nuances may be oversimplified. While care was taken to contextualize findings, there remains a risk of generalizing complex educational realities.

In sum, this study has revealed four key insights that illuminate the relationship between educational policy and teacher autonomy. First, curriculum autonomy cannot stand alone; it must be supported by robust systemic infrastructure—without which, policy ideals remain abstract and unrealized. Second, the comparison between Malaysia and Indonesia demonstrates that structured autonomy, as implemented in Malaysia, leads to more effective classroom practice. In contrast, Indonesia’s flexible but insufficiently supported model results in symbolic rather than substantive autonomy. Third, teacher agency tends to flourish in border and peripheral regions, such as Lombok–Sabah, where cultural immersion, necessity, and local challenges drive teachers to innovate and adapt curricula creatively. Finally, meaningful educational reform must shift away from centralized, top-down mandates and instead prioritize school-level responsiveness through a combination of trust, sustained professional training, and empowered local decision-making. These

insights provide a critical foundation for the final conclusion section, which synthesizes the findings and offers broader recommendations for policy, research, and practice.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed significant contrasts between the curriculum policy implementation strategies of Indonesia and Malaysia, particularly in relation to teacher autonomy. Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka promotes theoretical flexibility but lacks adequate structural support, resulting in limited practical autonomy. Conversely, Malaysia's systematic approach—integrating curriculum reform with sustained professional development, decentralized leadership, and collaborative structures—demonstrates a more effective translation of autonomy from policy into classroom practice. The institutional, cultural, and structural conditions in each country shape how teachers perceive and enact their professional agency. While Indonesian educators often work within a compliance-driven system with restricted support, Malaysian teachers benefit from environments that encourage decision-making, reflective teaching, and innovation. The study also identified border regions like Lombok–Sabah as fertile grounds for curriculum experimentation, where teachers act as curriculum co-constructors, adapting content to multilingual and culturally diverse contexts.

These findings suggest that teacher autonomy is not solely a matter of granting freedom but requires enabling environments, ongoing training, and culturally rooted responsiveness. Theoretically, the study contributes to comparative education by offering a model that connects curriculum frameworks, governance, and teacher agency. Practically, it urges policymakers to move beyond rhetorical reforms and instead focus on building conditions that empower teachers as active agents of change. Future research may benefit from fieldwork-based studies to explore teachers' lived experiences and from comparative studies that include additional Southeast Asian countries. Overall, the study underscores that curriculum policy must be both ambitious and adaptive—rooted in local realities while supported by systemic coherence.

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