

Tensions Between Cosmopolitan Curricula and Local Social Expectations in Southeast Asian Private Education

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Abstract: The script addresses the historical dispute between global curricula and local sociocultural requirements in private schooling in Southeast Asia. With private and international schools adapting more and more to globally inclined curriculums, such as the International Baccalaureate program and the Cambridge International program, the linguistic character, pedagogical practices, and civic engagement criteria introduced by these curricula often differ from the foundations of the local culture, religion, and language. To understand how these conflicts are manifested in language policies, civic consciousness, and educational equity, this research conducts a thematic analysis using the following frameworks: globalism (Hansen, 2008), postcolonial criticism (Joseph & Matthews, 2014), and Confucian globalism (Choo, 2020). By considering four Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand case studies, it has been argued that private schools cannot be considered a classroom group in joining these global curricula; instead, they are the loci of curriculum negotiation. Private schools thus cannot be assumed to follow global proven norms but take alternative routes. To this end, possible reactions include curriculum integration, stakeholder engagement, and cultural reciprocity. This work belongs to global education research since it is region-based and considers the subject of curriculum globalization via a monistic theoretical background.

Keywords: cosmopolitan education; Southeast Asia; private schools; curriculum tensions; global citizenship; Confucian ethics; postcolonial theory; bilingual education

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1. Introduction

Over the last 20 years, private education across Southeast Asia, particularly in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand, has flourished. The middle class seeks more; the economy is increasingly

integrated, and international credentialing is desirable. Growth ensues for these reasons. Yet the region is not homogeneous. Different colonial histories, language policies, and religious traditions color the education systems (Pinar, 2003). For example, Malaysia's dual-language policy,

Thailand's Buddhist-based moral education, and Singapore's bilingual policy impose different social norms that can be discordant with global curricular standards.

The tension is manifested in curriculum design, pedagogy, and citizenship formation, and this essay explores these tensions. It claims the tension is not simply a contradiction but a dynamic negotiation that private schools engage in to either localize global norms, or cosmopolitanize local values. By conceptually dissecting a postcolonial and rapidly globalizing culture, the article adds to the understanding of curriculum tensions and conflict (Byker & Marquardt, 2016), with brief case examples and theoretical frameworks.

2. Core Areas of Tension

2.1 Cultural and Linguistic Identity

One clear and strongly felt tension in private education in Southeast Asia is language and culture. Global curricula are usually taught in English. They focus on global topics and are shaped by Western education models. This helps students prepare for study and work across borders. But it also pushes local languages and cultural stories to the side.

In places like Singapore, national policy requires schools to balance English with a "Mother Tongue" language. Yet many international schools do not fully follow this rule. As a result, students may become weaker in their heritage languages. At the same time, their connection to local culture can also be broken.

In countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, language is closely linked to national identity and religion. Because of this, using English as the main teaching language can cause discomfort in society. It can also create fear that local culture is being diluted. Many parents and policymakers worry that students in these schools may slowly lose touch with their roots. Over time, this may weaken shared social values.

2.2 National vs. Global Citizenship

Global education often promotes ideas like human rights, understanding across cultures, and care for the environment. These ideas support a global way of thinking that goes beyond national borders.

At the same time, many Southeast Asian governments see education as a key way to build national identity. Schools are expected to shape moral behavior and civic responsibility. National curricula often stress history, patriotism, religious or spiritual beliefs, and respect for social order.

When private institutions implement global curricula that minimize or omit these themes, they are perceived as producing citizens who are disengaged from national values and collective memory. For example, in Thailand, the education system is closely linked to royal and Buddhist values. In Vietnam, civic education is based on socialist moral ideas. When international schools ignore these elements, their students may not fit well with wider social values. Because of this, they may face doubt or criticism from the government and from local communities. This tension is not only about teaching methods. It is also political, since it reflects different ideas about what kind of citizen schools should produce.

2.3 Socioeconomic Stratification

Private international schools that provide global curricula are often too expensive for most people. High tuition fees, selective admission rules, and close ties to elite culture help maintain education advantages for a small group. As a result, these schools serve as engines of social reproduction, enabling wealthy families to secure transnational futures for their children while the majority are funneled through national systems. Because of this, a two-track education system begins to form. This situation can increase social inequality and weaken national goals for equal development (Welch, 2011). At the same time, global schools often stay separate from local school systems. As a result, there is little cooperation or exchange with public schools. Over time, the distance between international and national curricula can create the idea that national

education is of lower quality. This view can reduce trust in public education among students and the wider society. In this way, the growth of global curricula in elite private schools creates both an education gap and a social ranking. In this ranking, “global” education is often seen as better than “local” education.

3. Illustrative Frameworks

3.1 Curriculum Value Tensions in Southeast Asian Private Education

To show the different priorities between global curricula and local social expectations, the updated radar chart below presents five main areas of education: language, teaching methods, citizenship, culture, and access by social class. Each area is rated on a scale from 0 to 10. The purpose is not to give exact numbers. It is to show the relative focus of each approach. The two educational models reflect different priorities. Global curricula focus mainly on preparing students for international settings. For this reason, they place strong emphasis on teaching in English, encouraging inquiry-based learning, and developing global citizenship skills. These elements support mobility and cross-border engagement. Local social expectations follow a different logic. Education is seen as a way to preserve shared culture and language. Schools are also expected to serve a broad population rather than a narrow elite. As a result, greater value is placed on cultural transmission, the continued use of local languages, and equal access to education across social groups.

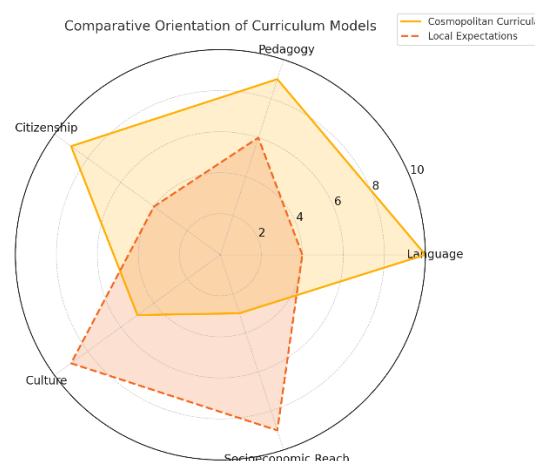


Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that these two approaches are not only about teaching choices. They also reflect different cultural, moral, and political goals. For example, cosmopolitan education assigns maximum emphasis to English fluency (10) and global citizenship (9), privileging transnational competencies and universalist ideals. However, this emphasis comes with low prioritization of socioeconomic inclusivity (3) and heritage culture (5), which are pillars of local educational expectations. Conversely, the local model demonstrates strong emphasis on mother-tongue preservation (score of 9), structured moral education, and civic patriotism—dimensions that are frequently de-emphasized in international programs.

The difference in “Socioeconomic Reach” is very clear. Global curricula mainly serve elite students. These students often prepare for study abroad and global jobs. Local education systems have a wider goal. They aim to support whole communities and keep national unity. Because of this difference, the education gap is not only about ideas. It also has real social effects, since curriculum choices can increase social division.

These different value patterns show a deeper conflict in ways of thinking. Global models focus on the individual and follow liberal and global ideas. Local expectations focus on the group and are shaped by history, society, and religion.

3.2 Comparative Characteristics of Competing Curricula

The table below shows a comparison of curriculum features across five main areas. It shows how global and local approaches are based on different ideas about knowledge, identity, and authority.

Table 1.

Dimension	Cosmopolitan Curriculum	Local Expectation
Language	Primarily English; global lingua franca	Mother-tongue reinforcement
Pedagogical Style	Inquiry, reflexivity, international case studies	Structured, exam-oriented, moral instruction
Citizenship Focus	Global citizens, rights, diversity ethics	Patriotism, social harmony, local duties
Cultural Content	Global narratives and histories	National history, religious traditions
Assessment Methods	Project-based, formative, reflective writing	Standardized tests (local/national exams)

The table also shows that a curriculum is more than a list of subjects. It reflects social hierarchies, moral beliefs, and language values.

4. Case Studies

Vietnam has seen fast growth in international schools. These schools receive little direct control from the state. But their teaching content often differs from national education goals. The Vietnamese government stresses civic education based on socialist moral values. Many international schools do not teach national history, political values, or Vietnamese literature. Because of this gap, concerns arise about how well students connect to society and culture in the long term.

In Singapore, the government strongly supports bilingual education and moral learning. Some students in international schools do not follow the required mother tongue rules. Reports from study tours and teachers show concern among parents and

educators. They feel that local culture, such as Singapore English and non-Western views in humanities subjects, receives too little attention (Soong, 2020; Soong & Caldwell, 2021). This situation creates worry that national identity may weaken as schools seek global status.

Malaysia presents a different situation. The growth of cross-border education has pushed schools to meet global standards and national cultural rules at the same time (Ren, 2024). Research by Hill, Cheong, and Leong (2014) shows that foreign university campuses in Malaysia must change their curricula. These changes help align teaching with Islamic values, Malay customs, and language laws. This process shows ongoing adjustment between global image and local acceptance.

Thailand adds another case. International curricula have spread across the country. At the same time, moral education remains a key part of national policy. The Ministry of Education requires teaching on Buddhist ethics and respect for the monarchy. International schools are not fully exempt from these rules. Yet many give these topics less attention. This leads to public discussion about the cultural duties of private schools.

5. Theoretical Insights

The tension between global curricula and local expectations in Southeast Asia can be better understood through several related theories. In education, cosmopolitanism supports openness to different cultures, global citizenship, and critical thinking (Choo, 2017). David Hansen (2008) states that cosmopolitan education should keep local traditions instead of removing them. He argues that students should learn from many traditions and give them new meaning. This view shows that global and local goals do not have to oppose each other.

Postcolonial theory offers another way to understand this issue. Joseph and Matthews (2014) explain that education systems in Southeast Asia are shaped by long histories of colonial rule and nation-building. Many global education models come from the Global North. Because of this, they may repeat

old power structures. This often happens through the strong use of English, Western knowledge systems, and individual-centered values. When this pattern is recognized, it leads to a more critical form of cosmopolitanism. In this form, global learning pays closer attention to history and culture.

Recent studies also discuss Confucian cosmopolitanism, which is especially useful in East and Southeast Asia. Choo (2020) argues that values such as moral self-growth, respect for family, and social balance can exist together with global ethical ideas. This view treats cosmopolitanism as something that can work with local moral traditions. It does not see the two as opposing forces. This idea fits well in places like Singapore and Vietnam, where Confucian traditions exist alongside strong interest in international education.

6. Strategic Responses

6.1 Hybrid Curriculum Design

Hybrid curriculum design offers a clear way to respond to the tension between global and local expectations. Schools do not need to choose one side. They can combine global skills with local content. These skills include critical thinking, use of more than one language, and learning about sustainability. At the same time, teaching can stay rooted in local culture.

For example, some private schools in Malaysia and the Philippines use bilingual courses. These courses mix Cambridge or IB programs with national language and history classes. This structure helps students gain international skills. At the same time, it helps them stay connected to their social and cultural setting.

6.2 Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder involvement is important for making curricula accepted and meaningful. Schools need to work with parents and students. They also need to work with local teachers, government officials, and religious or cultural leaders. This shared process allows schools to adjust teaching content and methods in ways that match local values.

In Thailand, some international schools work with Buddhist teachers. Together, they include mindfulness activities and moral lessons based on national education guidelines. These actions show that community-based planning can exist with international programs. They also help build trust and local support.

6.3 Integrated Assessment Approaches

Assessment is one area where global and local systems often differ. Global programs often use projects, reflection, and ongoing feedback. National systems often depend on major exams. Many international schools in Southeast Asia now use both methods.

In Vietnam, some international high schools prepare students for the IB Diploma and the national graduation exam. They do this by offering two assessment paths at the same time. This allows students to apply to universities inside the country and abroad. This method helps schools recognize different types of achievement and meet national rules.

6.4 Cultural Reciprocity

Cultural reciprocity means that local knowledge should be clearly valued in global education. Local languages, histories, and moral ideas should be treated as important forms of knowledge. Some schools in Singapore now include regional literature, Southeast Asian ideas, and multilingual identity in humanities classes.

These practices help prevent the loss of local culture in international schools. They also add depth to global learning by bringing in different ways of thinking.

7. Conclusion

The tensions discussed in this paper show a deeper struggle over the purpose of education, cultural acceptance, and control over knowledge in private schools in Southeast Asia. As global curricula enter private education in the region, they bring new subjects and teaching styles. At the same time, they challenge existing moral rules, language use, and

ideas about citizenship that shape national identity and community ties.

This paper explains that these tensions should not be seen as simple oppositions. Instead, they exist as changing and negotiated spaces. Through examples and theory, the paper shows how schools deal with

global demands and local responsibilities at the same time. It also shows that global and local values do not cancel each other out. They can work together when schools make careful choices in curriculum design, involve local groups, and respect local culture.

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