

A Comparative Analysis of Primary School Curricula in Indonesia and Malaysia: *Kurikulum Merdeka* and KSSR

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the primary education curricula of Indonesia and Malaysia—Indonesia’s *Kurikulum Merdeka* and Malaysia’s *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR)—compare in terms of curriculum relevance, depth of learning, and alignment between objectives, pedagogy, and assessment. Primary education plays a crucial role in developing foundational competencies and shaping long-term educational outcomes, making curriculum reform a central policy priority in Southeast Asia. Using a qualitative comparative research design, the study relies exclusively on Observation, interviews, and document analysis to ensure methodological consistency. Data were drawn from official curriculum frameworks, national education policy documents, and relevant scholarly literature from both countries. The analysis examined curriculum structure, content organization, pedagogical orientation, and assessment systems to identify key similarities and differences. The findings indicate that *Kurikulum Merdeka* emphasizes instructional flexibility, learner-centered and interdisciplinary learning, and character education, whereas KSSR prioritizes structured progression, mastery of foundational skills, early STEM integration, and national standardization. These contrasting approaches reflect differing governance models and national priorities in balancing innovation with accountability. This study contributes to comparative curriculum research by offering a novel cross-national perspective on two major Southeast Asian curriculum reforms and highlighting the importance of contextual alignment, teacher capacity, and balanced implementation strategies for improving primary education quality and relevance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Primary education provides the foundation for literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development, shaping learners' long-term trajectories and a nation's human capital. In contemporary education discourse, basic education is increasingly understood not merely as the transmission of subject knowledge but as the cultivation of competencies needed for uncertain futures, including critical thinking, collaboration, digital literacy, and character formation (Pabbajah et al., 2020). International frameworks emphasize that early schooling is decisive for reducing learning inequality and preparing children for lifelong learning and social participation (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). For this reason, curriculum reform at the primary level remains one of the most strategic interventions for improving educational quality and equity (Supianto et al., 2023).

Across Southeast Asia, curriculum change has accelerated in response to globalization, post-pandemic learning disruptions, and rising demands for workforce competitiveness. Governments are under pressure to integrate 21st-century competencies while also strengthening national identity, social cohesion, and moral education (Liew et al., 2025; Martínez-Mirambell et al., 2025). Comparative education research suggests that reforms in middle-income contexts often reflect this dual agenda: borrowing global policy ideas such as competency-based learning while adapting them to domestic cultural and political priorities (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). Understanding how these pressures shape curriculum design is therefore essential for evaluating reform trajectories in the region.

Furthermore, Indonesia and Malaysia provide a particularly valuable comparative case (Ratnasari et al., 2019). As neighboring countries with shared regional characteristics yet distinct governance traditions, they represent contrasting curriculum logics and implementation approaches. Both systems seek to modernize learning and enhance student competencies, but they differ in how authority, standards, and flexibility are structured within national education policy. Comparing these two contexts offers an opportunity to identify transferable practices, contextual constraints, and policy lessons relevant for Southeast Asian curriculum development (Supianto et al., 2023).

Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* reflects a reform orientation toward decentralization, instructional flexibility, and learner-centered pedagogy (Anum et al., 2025; Rohmah et al., 2024; Yoto et al., 2024). Introduced partly in response to learning loss and persistent inequality, it emphasizes project-based learning, interdisciplinary approaches, and character development through the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022). This curriculum framework positions schools and teachers as key agents of adaptation, allowing learning to be more responsive to local needs. However, its effectiveness depends heavily on teacher readiness, institutional capacity, and resource availability across diverse regions.

In contrast, Malaysia's *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR) is embedded within a centralized governance model that prioritizes structured progression, mastery of foundational skills, and national standardization. Aligned with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, KSSR emphasizes higher-order thinking, early STEM exposure, and accountability through coherent standards and systemwide support mechanisms (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013; Hashim et al., 2019). This structured approach seeks to ensure consistency and measurable outcomes, though challenges remain in balancing standardization with classroom-level innovation and diverse learner needs.

Despite expanding scholarship on curriculum reform in Southeast Asia, existing comparative studies between Indonesia and Malaysia tend to remain descriptive and often focus primarily on policy narratives or general curriculum characteristics. Previous research frequently compares reform agendas, competency frameworks, or broad governance structures, but provides limited analysis of how curriculum design elements—such as learning objectives, pedagogical strategies, and assessment practices—are structurally aligned within each system (Lathifah et al., 2025b; Ratnasari et al., 2019). As a result, curriculum is often treated as a static policy document rather than as an integrated system that connects intended goals, enacted pedagogy, and assessed learning outcomes. Moreover, relatively few studies examine how different governance models decentralized flexibility in Indonesia and centralized standardization in Malaysia shape curriculum coherence at the primary education level.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a comparative curriculum framework that integrates insights from curriculum theory and comparative education. The analysis focuses on three key dimensions: curriculum relevance, depth of learning, and alignment between learning objectives, instructional practices, and assessment systems. By examining these dimensions, the study moves beyond conventional policy comparison to evaluate the internal coherence of curriculum design in both countries. In doing so, the research contributes to comparative curriculum scholarship by offering a structured analytical model for assessing how different governance approaches shape curriculum implementation and learning experiences in primary education.

Beyond providing a descriptive comparison, this study also offers theoretical and policy contributions to the field of comparative curriculum research. Theoretically, the study applies a structured analytical framework that examines curriculum relevance, depth of learning, and alignment among objectives, pedagogy, and assessment. This approach moves beyond conventional cross-national comparisons that focus mainly on policy narratives by analyzing the internal coherence of curriculum systems. By linking curriculum governance models with instructional design elements, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how decentralization and standardization shape learning opportunities in primary education.

From a policy perspective, the study provides evidence-based insights for improving curriculum implementation in Southeast Asian education systems. The comparison between Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka and Malaysia's Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) highlights how different governance approaches influence flexibility, consistency, and teacher capacity in delivering curriculum reforms. These findings offer practical implications for policymakers seeking to balance innovation with system coherence, particularly in contexts where education systems must simultaneously address global competency demands and national educational priorities. Consequently, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on how curriculum reform can strengthen instructional quality, policy alignment, and equitable learning opportunities in primary education.

Therefore, this study conducts a comparative analysis of Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* and Malaysia's KSSR at the primary education level, framed around three analytical dimensions: curriculum relevance, depth of learning, and alignment between objectives, instructional approaches, and assessment practices. The study addresses two key research questions: (1) How do *Kurikulum Merdeka* and KSSR differ in curriculum structure, content organization, pedagogy, and assessment systems? (2) How do Strengths and Weaknesses of Kurikulum Merdeka (Indonesia) and KSSR (Malaysia)? By answering these questions, the study contributes to comparative curriculum scholarship and provides evidence-based insights for policymakers and educators seeking to strengthen curriculum coherence, instructional quality, and equity in Southeast Asian primary education.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design combining document analysis with limited field-based data to examine the implementation of primary education curricula in Indonesia and Malaysia. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows an in-depth exploration of curriculum policies, pedagogical practices, and assessment systems within their national contexts.

The study integrates two sources of data. First, document analysis was conducted on official curriculum documents, policy reports, and academic literature related to Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka and Malaysia's Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR). These documents include curriculum frameworks, implementation guidelines, and national education policy reports published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology and the Malaysian Ministry of Education. Second, qualitative field data were collected through teacher interviews and classroom observations to understand how the curricula are implemented in practice. The combination of document analysis and field-based evidence enables a more comprehensive comparative analysis of curriculum structure, pedagogy, and assessment practices in both education systems.

2.2 Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in selected primary schools in Indonesia and Malaysia between October and December 2025. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who had direct experience implementing the respective national curricula.

In Indonesia, the research involved three primary schools located in urban and semi-urban areas that had implemented Kurikulum Merdeka. In Malaysia, three primary schools implementing the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) were selected to represent schools operating under the national curriculum framework.

A total of twelve primary school teachers participated in the study, consisting of six teachers from Indonesia and six teachers from Malaysia. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- They were actively teaching at the primary level.
- They had at least two years of experience implementing the current curriculum.
- They were directly involved in classroom instruction and student assessment.

In addition to interviews, six classroom observations were conducted (three in Indonesia and three in Malaysia) to examine how teaching strategies, project-based learning, and assessment practices were applied during classroom instruction.

2.3 Source of Data

2.3.1 Primary data

Table 1. The Primary Data

Primary Data	Data Sources	Instrumentation
Primary schools in Indonesia	Teachers, principals, supervisors	Observation; interviews
Primary schools in Malaysia	Teachers, principals, supervisors	Observation; interviews
Relevant education offices/agencies	Head of the office	Observation; interviews

2.3.2 Secondary data

Table 2. The Secondary Data

Secondary Data	Data Sources	Data Collection Tools
Indonesia: Kurikulum Merdeka documents, 2013 Curriculum, and previous curricula	Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi (Kemendikbudristek)	Document analysis
Malaysia: Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) documents, teacher guidebooks, and annual reports on primary education	Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM)	Document analysis
Academic journals and scholarly publications		Document analysis

2.4 Technique of Collecting Data

Data collection techniques were employed to address the research questions and achieve the study objectives through three main instruments: observation, interviews, and document analysis.

a. Observation

It was used to capture how the primary education curricula are implemented in authentic classroom contexts. The researcher conducted structured observations in selected primary schools in Indonesia and Malaysia to examine teaching practices, learning activities, student engagement,

classroom interactions, and assessment processes. This instrument enabled the researcher to directly see how curriculum principles—such as learner-centered pedagogy, project-based learning, or mastery-focused instruction—are translated into daily instructional routines. Observation also provided valuable evidence of the extent to which curriculum goals align with actual classroom practice, allowing the study to identify similarities and differences in curriculum enactment between *Kurikulum Merdeka* and KSSR.

b. Interviews

Interviews were conducted as semi-structured conversations with key educational stakeholders, including teachers, principals, supervisors, and officials from relevant education agencies. This instrument was essential for gaining deeper qualitative insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in implementing curriculum reforms. Through guided questions and follow-up probing, the researcher explored how educators interpret curriculum objectives, apply pedagogical strategies, manage assessment demands, and respond to institutional support or constraints. Interviews also helped reveal contextual factors such as teacher readiness, resource availability, and policy expectations that influence curriculum implementation in both countries.

c. Document analysis

It served as the primary tool for collecting and examining secondary data from official curriculum frameworks, government policy documents, teacher guidebooks, annual education reports, and other instructional materials. The researcher systematically reviewed these documents to extract key information related to curriculum objectives, subject structure, competency focus, pedagogical orientation, and assessment systems. To strengthen the comparative process, a curriculum comparison matrix was developed to organize data into clear analytical categories, enabling side-by-side evaluation of Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* and Malaysia's KSSR. By combining document analysis with observation and interviews, the study ensures a comprehensive understanding of both curriculum design and its practical implementation, providing a robust foundation for cross-national curriculum comparison.

2.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis in this study was conducted using a qualitative comparative approach that corresponds directly with the three main data collection instruments: observation, interviews, and document analysis. The purpose of the analysis was to generate an in-depth understanding of how Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* and Malaysia's *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR) differ and align in terms of curriculum design, pedagogical orientation, assessment practices, and implementation realities at the primary education level. The analysis process was carried out systematically to ensure that interpretations were grounded in evidence from multiple sources.

a. Observation data

Data were analyzed by reviewing classroom field notes and structured observation checklists collected from selected primary schools in both countries. The researcher examined how teachers delivered lessons, how students engaged in learning activities, and how classroom instruction reflected curriculum principles such as learner-centered pedagogy, competency-based learning, project-based activities, or mastery-focused approaches. Observational findings were then categorized into analytical themes, including instructional strategies, classroom interaction, differentiation practices, and assessment implementation. This analysis provided direct evidence of how curriculum frameworks are enacted in everyday teaching and learning contexts, allowing the researcher to identify practical consistencies or gaps between curriculum intentions and classroom realities.

b. Interview data

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to capture stakeholders' perspectives on curriculum reform. Interviews with teachers, principals, supervisors, and education officials were transcribed and carefully read several times to ensure familiarity with the data. The researcher applied coding procedures to identify recurring themes related to participants' understanding of curriculum objectives, experiences with pedagogical change, challenges in assessment, availability of institutional

support, and professional development needs. These themes were compared across Indonesian and Malaysian participants to highlight both shared concerns and context-specific differences. Interview analysis enriched the study by providing explanatory insights into how educators interpret curriculum policies and how implementation is shaped by school capacity, teacher readiness, and governance expectations.

c. Document analysis data

Data were examined through systematic content analysis of official curriculum frameworks, government policy documents, teacher guidebooks, and national education reports from Indonesia and Malaysia. The researcher extracted key information related to curriculum aims, subject structure, competency emphasis, pedagogical guidance, and assessment systems. To strengthen the comparative process, a curriculum comparison matrix was developed to organize extracted data into clear categories, enabling side-by-side evaluation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* and KSSR. Document analysis provided the foundation for understanding the intended curriculum in each country and the policy priorities that shape curriculum reform.

Finally, findings from observations, interviews, and document analysis were integrated through triangulation to strengthen credibility and ensure consistency across data sources. For example, curriculum principles identified in official documents were cross-checked with classroom observations and teacher interview accounts to assess alignment between intended policy and enacted practice. By combining classroom-level evidence, stakeholder perspectives, and official documentation, the study provides a comprehensive and reliable comparative understanding of primary education curriculum reform in Indonesia and Malaysia, offering insights into both curriculum design and implementation challenges.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Comparative Analysis Between Indonesia and Malaysia

3.1.1 Comparative Analysis of Curriculum Structure

The results demonstrate that both Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* and Malaysia's *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR) are structured to deliver six years of compulsory primary education, targeting learners aged approximately six to twelve years. This shared duration reflects a common regional commitment to ensuring foundational education as a basis for lifelong learning. However, despite this similarity, substantial differences emerge in how learning progression, instructional organization, and curriculum flexibility are conceptualized and implemented.

Table 3. Comparative Analysis of Curriculum Structure

Aspect	Indonesia: Kurikulum Merdeka	Malaysia: Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR)	Comparative Interpretation
Educational Duration	Six years of compulsory primary education (Grades 1–6).	Six years of compulsory primary education (Years 1–6).	Both systems ensure foundational education over the same duration.
Organizational Framework	Phase-based structure: Phase A (Grades 1–2), Phase B (Grades 3–4), Phase C (Grades 5–6).	Stage-based structure: Stage 1 (Years 1–3), Stage 2 (Years 4–6).	Indonesia emphasizes cumulative learning across phases, while Malaysia applies sequential stages.
Learning Progression	Outcomes achieved flexibly across two-year phases, allowing adjustment to student readiness.	Linear progression with clear benchmarks that must be mastered before moving forward.	<i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> supports developmental pacing; KSSR supports systematic mastery.

Aspect	Indonesia: Kurikulum Merdeka	Malaysia: Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR)	Comparative Interpretation
Instructional Time Allocation	Approximately 80% intracurricular learning and 20% interdisciplinary project work (P5 projects).	Strong focus on subject-based curriculum hours, with co-curricular activities treated separately.	Indonesia structurally integrates projects, while Malaysia maintains clearer curricular boundaries.
Curriculum Flexibility	High adaptability for schools and teachers to contextualize pacing and sequencing.	Nationally standardized structure with regulated sequencing and learning standards.	Kurikulum Merdeka prioritizes autonomy; KSSR prioritizes coherence and consistency.

The comparison shows that Kurikulum Merdeka adopts a phase-based structure consisting of Phase A (Grades 1–2), Phase B (Grades 3–4), and Phase C (Grades 5–6), with each phase spanning two academic years. This structure allows learning outcomes to be achieved gradually within a broader developmental period. Teachers therefore have greater flexibility to adjust instructional pacing according to students' readiness and learning progress.

Interview data from Indonesian educators support this interpretation. A school principal similarly noted that the phase structure allows teachers to focus more on conceptual understanding rather than simply completing syllabus targets. One teacher explained:

"Under Kurikulum Merdeka, we are not required to complete competencies strictly within one year. The two-year phase gives us flexibility to adjust learning depending on students' understanding." (Teacher interview, Indonesia).

In contrast, Malaysia's KSSR applies a stage-based structure consisting of Stage 1 (Years 1–3) and Stage 2 (Years 4–6). This model reflects a more linear learning progression supported by clearly defined annual standards. Teachers are required to ensure that students achieve specific competencies before progressing to higher-level content. An interview with a Malaysian teacher highlighted this structured approach:

"The syllabus clearly defines what students must learn at each level. This helps teachers maintain consistent standards across different schools." (Teacher interview, Malaysia).

These findings indicate that Kurikulum Merdeka prioritizes developmental pacing and flexibility, allowing teachers to adjust instruction according to students' readiness and learning progress. Its phase-based structure supports deeper understanding and interdisciplinary learning. In contrast, the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) emphasizes standardized progression through clearly defined benchmarks and structured stages. This approach ensures consistency and systematic skill development across schools but provides less flexibility for adapting instruction.

3.1.2 Comparative Analysis of Curriculum Content and Subjects

The findings indicate that both Kurikulum Merdeka and KSSR include core subject areas commonly found in primary education curricula, such as language, mathematics, science, moral or religious education, physical education, and the arts. Both curricula prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy as central components of early schooling. In addition, the inclusion of science and creative subjects demonstrates a commitment to developing learners' analytical thinking and expressive abilities. Overall, the presence of these common subject domains shows that Indonesia and Malaysia align their primary education goals with internationally recognized standards of comprehensive child development, as shown in the table.

Table 4. Comparative Analysis of Curriculum Content and Subjects

Aspect	Indonesia: Kurikulum Merdeka	Malaysia: KSSR	Comparative Interpretation
Content Orientation	Competency-based curriculum emphasizing essential learning outcomes and interdisciplinary integration.	Subject-based curriculum emphasizing structured mastery of core knowledge areas.	Indonesia promotes integration, while Malaysia maintains clearer subject divisions.
Subject Organization	More flexible subject arrangement with opportunities for thematic learning.	Clearly defined national subjects such as Bahasa Melayu, English, Mathematics, Science, and Moral/Islamic Education.	Kurikulum Merdeka is adaptive; KSSR is standardized and uniform.
Character and Values Education	Implemented through mandatory Pancasila Student Profile Projects embedded within curriculum.	Values embedded mainly through formal subjects such as Islamic Education, Moral Education, and civic-related learning.	Indonesia integrates values through interdisciplinary projects; Malaysia integrates through subject delivery.
Local Context Adaptation	Schools may adapt learning materials to regional needs and contexts.	Curriculum content is centrally regulated to ensure consistency nationwide.	Indonesia supports contextual diversity; Malaysia ensures systemic uniformity.
Curriculum Breadth	Focuses on essential competencies with flexibility for enrichment.	Focuses on comprehensive national standards across subjects.	Indonesia emphasizes essential learning; Malaysia emphasizes structured national coverage.

Furthermore, the table demonstrates differing approaches to character and values education as well as curriculum adaptability. Classroom observations reveal notable differences in how the two curriculum systems influence instructional practices. In Indonesian classrooms implementing Kurikulum Merdeka, teachers frequently integrate interdisciplinary projects as part of the P5 (Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila) program. During one observed lesson, students worked collaboratively on a thematic project connecting environmental awareness with local community issues. The teacher facilitated group discussions and inquiry-based activities rather than relying primarily on lecture-based instruction. An Indonesian teacher described this approach:

“The project activities encourage students to explore real-world issues. They learn by discussing problems, collecting information, and presenting their ideas.” (Teacher interview, Indonesia).

These observations indicate that the curriculum encourages more student-centered learning and interdisciplinary exploration. In contrast, classroom observations in Malaysian schools implementing KSSR show a more structured lesson sequence. Teachers typically follow a clear instructional pattern consisting of explanation, guided practice, and individual exercises aligned with national learning standards. Most Malaysian teacher explained:

“KSSR lessons are organized according to the learning standards. We introduce the concept, guide the students through examples, and then provide exercises to ensure they understand the topic.” (Teacher interview, Malaysia)

While this approach ensures systematic coverage of curriculum content, it offers less flexibility for interdisciplinary project work compared with the Indonesian model.

3.1.3 Comparative Analysis of Pedagogical Approaches

The results reveal that both curricula promote student-centered learning and the development of 21st-century competencies, although they employ different pedagogical strategies. Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes differentiated instruction, contextual learning, and experiential pedagogies. A defining feature of Kurikulum Merdeka is the formal inclusion of project-based learning through the *Pancasila Student Profile Projects*, which account for approximately 20% of instructional time. These projects are interdisciplinary in nature and aim to develop collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and civic values as follows in Table 3.

Table 5. Comparative Analysis of Pedagogical Approaches

Aspect	Indonesia: Kurikulum Merdeka	Malaysia: KSSR	Comparative Interpretation
Teaching Orientation	Learner-centered approach emphasizing differentiated instruction and active learning.	Mastery-based approach emphasizing systematic teaching aligned with national standards.	Indonesia prioritizes learner diversity; Malaysia prioritizes structured mastery.
Teacher Autonomy	Teachers have significant autonomy to design learning pathways, pacing, and materials.	Teachers follow clearly defined curriculum standards, objectives, and instructional frameworks.	Kurikulum Merdeka promotes flexibility; KSSR promotes centralized regulation.
Interdisciplinary Learning	Strong emphasis through project-based learning (P5) integrated in formal curriculum.	Limited formal interdisciplinary allocation; focus remains on subject teaching.	Indonesia institutionalizes project learning more strongly than Malaysia.
Assessment Practices	Formative and competency-based assessment supporting holistic student growth across phases.	Assessment focuses on achieving measurable benchmarks and mastery outcomes.	Indonesia emphasizes holistic development; Malaysia emphasizes standardized achievement.
Classroom Implementation	Adaptable pedagogy responsive to local context and student readiness.	Structured pedagogy ensuring consistency across schools nationwide.	Kurikulum Merdeka supports contextual adaptation; KSSR ensures national coherence.

The table illustrates clear pedagogical differences between Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka and Malaysia's KSSR. Kurikulum Merdeka adopts a learner-centered orientation emphasizing differentiated instruction and active learning, whereas KSSR applies a mastery-based approach focused on systematic teaching aligned with national standards. Interview findings from teachers in Indonesia indicate that the flexibility of Kurikulum Merdeka allows educators to adapt instruction to diverse classroom conditions. Some teachers explained:

"The curriculum gives us flexibility to design activities that suit our students. Through the P5 projects, students can work collaboratively and explore real-world issues." (Teacher interview, Indonesia).

Classroom observations further support this perspective. During one observed lesson, students worked in small groups to design a community-based environmental project related to waste management. The teacher facilitated discussion and guided inquiry rather than delivering direct instruction, demonstrating how project-based learning encourages student participation and critical thinking.

In contrast, Malaysian teachers described KSSR as providing a more structured instructional framework. Some respondents explained:

"KSSR lessons follow clear learning standards. Teachers introduce the concept, guide students through examples, and then provide exercises to ensure mastery." (Teacher interview, Malaysia)

Observations in Malaysian classrooms confirmed that lessons typically followed a structured sequence consisting of teacher explanation, guided practice, and individual tasks aligned with national learning standards. This approach ensures consistency in the delivery of curriculum content and helps students systematically master foundational competencies.

Thematic analysis of interview and observation data suggests three key patterns. First, Kurikulum Merdeka provides greater pedagogical flexibility and encourages interdisciplinary learning through project-based activities. Second, KSSR emphasizes instructional structure and national coherence through clearly defined standards and mastery-based progression. Third, while Indonesia prioritizes contextual adaptation and holistic development, Malaysia prioritizes consistency and measurable learning outcomes across schools.

Overall, the findings indicate that the two curricula adopt different strategies for achieving student-centered learning: Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes flexibility and experiential learning, while KSSR focuses on structured instruction and systematic mastery of competencies.

3.1.4 Comparative Analysis of Assessment Systems

The results indicate that both Indonesia and Malaysia have reoriented their primary education assessment systems away from high-stakes examinations toward more holistic and continuous evaluation models. This shift reflects global trends in assessment reform. Kurikulum Merdeka employs diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments to monitor student progress and competency development. Assessment outcomes are reported through descriptive narratives rather than solely numerical scores.

Table 6. Comparative analysis of assessment systems

Assessment Dimension	Indonesia: Kurikulum Merdeka	Malaysia: KSSR	Comparative Interpretation
Assessment Reform Orientation	Assessment has shifted away from high-stakes examinations toward holistic and continuous evaluation aligned with competency development.	Assessment has similarly moved toward holistic models, reducing reliance on large-scale examinations at the primary level.	Both systems reflect global trends in assessment reform emphasizing broader learner development.
Types of Assessment Used	Employs diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments to monitor student progress across learning phases.	Applies School-Based Assessment (SBA) and Classroom Assessment (PBD), supported by structured national guidelines.	Indonesia provides greater teacher-driven flexibility, while Malaysia uses structured school-based systems.
Assessment Reporting Format	Outcomes are communicated through descriptive narrative feedback rather than solely numerical scores.	Assessment results are recorded systematically, combining holistic evaluation with standardized documentation.	Kurikulum Merdeka prioritizes individualized narrative reporting; KSSR emphasizes structured record-keeping.
Holistic Domain Coverage	Focuses on competency development and learner growth, supporting assessment-for-learning practices.	Covers cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains within a holistic assessment framework.	Both curricula adopt holistic perspectives, but KSSR applies them through more centralized structures.
Degree of Centralization	Greater assessment flexibility with teacher autonomy in interpreting progress and providing feedback.	Retains centralized oversight, monitoring mechanisms, and procedures to ensure comparability across schools.	Indonesia emphasizes adaptability; Malaysia emphasizes consistency and accountability.
Key Strengths	Aligns with assessment-for-learning principles by emphasizing	Structured assessment balances formative practices with	Kurikulum Merdeka strengthens learner-

Assessment Dimension	Indonesia: Kurikulum Merdeka	Malaysia: KSSR	Comparative Interpretation
	formative feedback and learner self-regulation (Marno et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2022). Narrative feedback supports personalized learning pathways.	national benchmarking and policy accountability (UNESCO, 2022). Centralized consistency strengthens monitoring.	centered development; KSSR strengthens system-wide comparability.
Main Challenges	Flexible assessment requires strong teacher assessment literacy; variability in teacher judgment may reduce reliability without moderation mechanisms (Farashaiyan & Amirkhiz, 2011).	Structured assessment may increase administrative workload and create assessment pressure for teachers and students.	Indonesia risks inconsistency; Malaysia risks burden and pressure under centralized procedures.
Overall Assessment Orientation	Greater emphasis on flexibility, narrative feedback, and formative learner development.	Greater emphasis on structured consistency, accountability, and benchmarking.	Kurikulum Merdeka reflects adaptability; KSSR reflects coherence and system regulation.

The table shows that both curricula promote holistic assessment practices, although their implementation mechanisms differ. Kurikulum Merdeka allows greater flexibility for teachers to design assessments aligned with student needs and learning progress. In contrast, Malaysia's KSSR implements School-Based Assessment (SBA) and Classroom Assessment (Pentaksiran Bilik Darjah – PBD) supported by structured national guidelines and monitoring systems. Interview data from Indonesian teachers indicate that narrative assessment provides opportunities to better understand individual student development. Some teachers explained:

“Through descriptive feedback, we can explain students’ strengths and areas for improvement more clearly than just giving scores.” (Teacher interview, Indonesia)“.

Classroom observations also revealed that teachers frequently used formative assessment strategies such as reflective questioning, peer discussion, and feedback sessions to monitor student understanding during lessons. In one observed class, the teacher asked students to present their group work and then facilitated peer feedback, demonstrating how assessment activities were integrated directly into the learning process.

In Malaysia, teachers emphasized the structured nature of the assessment system under KSSR. One respondent noted:

“The PBD system provides clear indicators of what students need to achieve. It helps teachers track progress systematically.” (Teacher interview, Malaysia)“.

Observations in Malaysian classrooms confirmed that assessment was regularly documented through structured checklists and performance indicators aligned with national learning standards. Teachers often conducted short exercises or quizzes at the end of lessons to ensure that students had mastered the required competencies before moving to the next topic.

Thematic analysis of interview and observation data highlights three key patterns. First, Kurikulum Merdeka promotes formative and narrative assessment practices that support individualized feedback and learner development. Second, KSSR emphasizes systematic documentation and standardized procedures to ensure consistency across schools. Third, while Indonesia prioritizes teacher autonomy in interpreting student progress, Malaysia prioritizes comparability and accountability through centralized monitoring mechanisms. Overall, these findings suggest that both curricula adopt holistic assessment principles but operationalize them differently:

Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes flexibility and formative feedback, whereas KSSR emphasizes structured assessment systems and national consistency.

3.2 Strengths and Weaknesses of Kurikulum Merdeka (Indonesia) and KSSR (Malaysia)

The findings indicate that Indonesia’s Kurikulum Merdeka demonstrates a high level of curricular flexibility when compared to Malaysia’s Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR). The phase-based structure allows learning objectives to be distributed across several academic years, enabling teachers to adjust instructional pacing according to students’ learning readiness. This design reduces pressure on students to meet rigid yearly targets and supports more personalized learning pathways. Teachers are given discretion to revisit concepts until mastery is achieved. Learning progression is not strictly bound to age or grade-level constraints. This flexibility supports diverse classroom contexts and heterogeneous learner abilities. Schools can adapt lesson sequencing to local needs. Instruction becomes more responsive to students’ developmental stages. As a result, the curriculum accommodates varied learning trajectories. This structural flexibility is a defining feature of Kurikulum Merdeka.

Table 7. Strengths and Weaknesses of Kurikulum Merdeka and KSSR

Curriculum	Strengths	Weaknesses
Kurikulum Merdeka (Indonesia)	Kurikulum Merdeka demonstrates a high degree of curricular flexibility through its phase-based learning structure, allowing learning outcomes to be achieved cumulatively across several years rather than within rigid annual grade targets. This approach supports personalized learning pathways and enables teachers to adjust pacing according to student readiness. The curriculum strongly emphasizes character education through the Pancasila Student Profile framework, integrating moral, civic, and social values across subject areas. Interdisciplinary project-based learning is institutionalized through dedicated instructional time for Pancasila Student Profile Projects, promoting inquiry, creativity, collaboration, and real-world engagement. This design enhances student-centered learning and strengthens the coherence between academic knowledge and character development.	Despite its strengths, Kurikulum Merdeka faces significant implementation challenges due to uneven teacher readiness and professional capacity across regions. The high level of flexibility increases reliance on teacher competence, resulting in inconsistencies in instructional quality between schools. Differences are particularly evident between urban and rural contexts where access to training and curriculum support varies. Infrastructure limitations, including unequal access to digital devices and stable internet connectivity, further constrain curriculum enactment. Remote and under-resourced schools struggle to utilize digital learning platforms effectively, reducing equity in curriculum delivery. These gaps hinder the full realization of the curriculum’s intended adaptability and innovation.
KSSR (Malaysia)	Malaysia’s KSSR exhibits strong curriculum standardization and systemic coherence, with clearly defined learning standards applied uniformly nationwide. Structured guidelines provide teachers with clear sequencing of content, learning objectives, and assessment benchmarks, ensuring consistent instructional expectations across schools. A major strength of KSSR is its mastery-oriented approach to foundational literacy and numeracy, emphasizing systematic reinforcement and early intervention for students who fall behind. The curriculum also reflects a forward-looking orientation through its emphasis on early STEM education, introducing science, technology, and	However, the structured and centralized nature of KSSR limits pedagogical flexibility and reduces opportunities for contextual adaptation. Teachers are required to follow prescribed standards and timelines, making differentiated instruction and personalization more difficult for diverse learner needs. Curriculum rigidity may constrain innovation in teaching practices and reduce responsiveness to local contexts. Additionally, curriculum density is a notable challenge, particularly in upper primary levels where numerous subjects and objectives must be covered within limited instructional time. This often leads to surface-level coverage of content, reduced depth of conceptual

Curriculum	Strengths	Weaknesses
	design subjects at the primary level to build analytical and problem-solving competencies. These strengths promote nationwide equity, stability, and academic readiness for future schooling.	understanding, and increased cognitive load for students. Interdisciplinary learning opportunities remain limited under the dense and structured curriculum framework.

The findings indicate that Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka demonstrates a high level of curricular flexibility when compared to Malaysia's Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR). The phase-based structure allows learning objectives to be distributed across several academic years, enabling teachers to adjust instructional pacing according to students' learning readiness. This design reduces pressure on students to meet rigid yearly targets and supports more personalized learning pathways. Teachers are given discretion to revisit concepts until mastery is achieved, and learning progression is not strictly bound to grade-level constraints. As a result, instruction can be adapted to diverse classroom contexts and heterogeneous learner abilities.

Interview data from Indonesian teachers highlight the practical implications of this flexibility. One teacher explained:

"Through the phase system, we do not have to rush students to complete all material within one year. If students still need time, we can revisit the topic in the next phase." (Teacher interview, Indonesia)".

Classroom observations further illustrate this practice. In one observed lesson, the teacher organized students into small groups to work on a community-based environmental project as part of the Pancasila Student Profile Project (P5). Students discussed local waste management issues and presented possible solutions, while the teacher acted as a facilitator who guided discussion and provided feedback. This observation demonstrates how Kurikulum Merdeka encourages interdisciplinary learning and allows teachers to adjust learning activities according to student engagement and readiness.

In contrast, Malaysia's KSSR reflects a more structured and standardized curriculum framework. The curriculum is organized around clearly defined national learning standards that guide lesson sequencing, assessment, and expected outcomes. Teachers follow structured instructional plans to ensure that students achieve mastery of foundational competencies, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

Teachers interviewed in Malaysia emphasized the clarity provided by this standardized framework. One respondent stated:

"The learning standards help teachers know exactly what students need to achieve at each stage. It ensures that students across different schools receive the same learning foundation." (Teacher interview, Malaysia)".

Classroom observations in Malaysian primary schools showed that lessons typically followed a structured sequence of teacher explanation, guided practice, and individual exercises aligned with national learning standards. Teachers frequently used short tasks and worksheets to monitor mastery of concepts before progressing to the next topic. This approach supports consistent implementation of the curriculum across schools and strengthens accountability in learning outcomes.

Thematic analysis of the interview and observation data reveals two major patterns. First, Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes flexibility, contextual learning, and interdisciplinary project work, allowing teachers to adapt instruction to student needs and local contexts. Second, KSSR emphasizes standardized progression and mastery-based instruction, ensuring coherence and comparability of learning outcomes across schools. While Indonesia's approach supports innovation and personalized learning, Malaysia's approach prioritizes system-wide consistency and structured academic progression.

Overall, the findings suggest that Kurikulum Merdeka prioritizes adaptability and student-centered learning through flexible structures and project-based activities, whereas KSSR prioritizes national consistency through standardized learning standards and mastery-oriented instruction. Each system therefore reflects different strategies for balancing curriculum innovation, teacher autonomy, and educational equity.

Discussion

Comparative Analysis of Curriculum Structure

The phase-based structure of *Kurikulum Merdeka* reflects contemporary curriculum governance models that emphasize decentralization and learner-centered educational design. In curriculum theory, decentralized systems allow schools and teachers greater autonomy to adapt instructional strategies according to student needs and local contexts. Differentiated instruction and flexible learning progression are widely recognized as effective strategies for addressing individual differences in learning pace and readiness (Tomlinson, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). By extending learning goals across two-year phases, Kurikulum Merdeka enables teachers to adjust pacing, revisit concepts, and provide remediation without rigid grade-level constraints. From a comparative education perspective, such flexibility aligns with governance approaches that prioritize local agency and contextual responsiveness in curriculum implementation.

However, decentralization also introduces structural challenges. Studies on curriculum governance indicate that increased teacher autonomy requires strong professional capacity, curriculum literacy, and institutional support (Nguyen, 2024; Ratnasari et al., 2019). In systems where teacher preparation and school resources vary significantly, flexible curricula may generate uneven learning experiences across regions. This issue is particularly relevant in large and geographically diverse education systems such as Indonesia, where disparities in infrastructure and professional development opportunities may affect how curriculum policies are enacted at the classroom level.

In contrast, Malaysia's KSSR reflects a more centralized curriculum governance model characterized by standardized learning objectives, structured instructional sequencing, and clear national benchmarks. This approach aligns with mastery learning theory, which emphasizes that students should achieve defined competencies before advancing to more complex learning stages (Nguyen, 2024; Yassin et al., 2020). The strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy mastery in Stage 1 is supported by empirical research demonstrating that early foundational skills are critical predictors of long-term academic success (Nguyen, 2024; Tai et al., 2022). Within comparative education frameworks, centralized curriculum models are often designed to ensure national coherence, reduce disparities between schools, and strengthen accountability mechanisms.

Nevertheless, highly standardized systems may limit pedagogical responsiveness. Research on curriculum standardization suggests that rigid structures can constrain teachers' ability to adapt instruction to diverse learning needs or local cultural contexts (Shaari et al., 2023; Supianto et al., 2023; Tai et al., 2022). When curriculum pacing and content coverage are tightly regulated, opportunities for creative pedagogy, interdisciplinary learning, and contextual adaptation may become restricted. This may affect student engagement, particularly in classrooms where learners progress at different rates or require differentiated instructional support.

From a comparative education perspective, the differences between Kurikulum Merdeka and KSSR illustrate a broader policy tension between decentralization and standardization in curriculum governance. Decentralized systems prioritize flexibility, innovation, and contextual responsiveness, while centralized systems emphasize consistency, equity of standards, and accountability across schools. Neither model is inherently superior; rather, each reflects different policy priorities and institutional capacities.

Recent international education discourse increasingly advocates hybrid curriculum governance models that integrate both approaches. Such models combine clear national learning standards with guided teacher autonomy in pedagogy and assessment, aiming to balance consistency with

responsiveness (OECD, 2023). Within this framework, Kurikulum Merdeka may benefit from stronger professional support systems to ensure consistent implementation, while KSSR could expand opportunities for pedagogical flexibility and interdisciplinary learning. Strengthening this balance between autonomy and standardization may enhance curriculum effectiveness and equity in both education systems.

Comparative Analysis of Curriculum Content and Subjects

The integration of science and social studies in *Kurikulum Merdeka* through the IPAS framework reflects a curriculum governance approach that emphasizes decentralization and pedagogical flexibility. From a constructivist perspective, interdisciplinary integration allows students to connect concepts across domains and relate knowledge to real-world contexts, which can enhance engagement and conceptual understanding in primary education (Chua & Bong, 2024). Within decentralized curriculum systems, such integration often provides teachers with greater autonomy to design thematic learning experiences that respond to local contexts and student interests.

However, curriculum decentralization also introduces governance challenges. Research in comparative education suggests that when curricular integration relies heavily on teacher autonomy, its effectiveness depends on teachers' professional capacity and content knowledge (Marno et al., 2024). Without adequate scaffolding and professional development, interdisciplinary models may risk weakening disciplinary depth, particularly in subjects such as science that require structured conceptual progression. In this sense, the implementation of IPAS illustrates a common tension in decentralized curriculum systems: the balance between pedagogical innovation and maintaining strong disciplinary rigor.

In contrast, Malaysia's KSSR reflects a more centralized curriculum governance model characterized by clearly defined subject boundaries and structured progression of disciplinary knowledge. The subject-based organization aligns with knowledge-centered curriculum traditions that prioritize systematic accumulation of disciplinary understanding. Comparative education research indicates that centralized curriculum frameworks often aim to ensure epistemic clarity, national coherence, and consistent learning outcomes across schools (Hashim et al., 2019; Samsul Hady et al., 2025). The early introduction of Design and Technology and ICT in KSSR also reflects Malaysia's broader policy strategy to strengthen technological competencies and prepare students for participation in a knowledge-based economy.

Nevertheless, strong curriculum standardization may also produce unintended pedagogical consequences. Studies on curriculum policy indicate that highly structured subject frameworks can contribute to curriculum overload when numerous subjects compete for limited instructional time (Inui et al., 2025; Marno et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2022). For young learners, excessive subject fragmentation may increase cognitive load and reduce opportunities for reflective learning and conceptual consolidation. Within centralized systems, teachers may also experience limited flexibility to adapt learning activities or integrate cross-disciplinary themes relevant to local contexts.

From a comparative education perspective, the contrast between *Kurikulum Merdeka* and KSSR reflects broader policy tensions between decentralization and standardization in curriculum governance. Decentralized models tend to prioritize flexibility, contextual learning, and holistic educational development, while centralized systems emphasize disciplinary coherence, national consistency, and measurable learning standards. Each approach embodies different policy priorities and institutional capacities within national education systems.

Contemporary curriculum scholarship increasingly advocates hybrid governance models that integrate both principles. Such models combine clear disciplinary standards with opportunities for interdisciplinary learning and teacher autonomy (OECD, 2023). Within this framework, Kurikulum Merdeka may benefit from stronger support for disciplinary scaffolding to ensure conceptual depth in integrated subjects such as IPAS. Conversely, KSSR could expand opportunities for interdisciplinary learning and contextual adaptation to enhance student engagement and reduce curriculum

fragmentation. Balancing these governance approaches may strengthen the coherence, flexibility, and effectiveness of primary education curricula in both countries.

Comparative Analysis of Pedagogical Approaches

Project-based learning in *Kurikulum Merdeka* reflects broader shifts in curriculum governance toward decentralized and learner-centered education systems. Global curriculum reforms increasingly promote experiential and inquiry-based pedagogies to develop transferable competencies such as collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving (Muhajarah & Soebahar, 2024; Ratnasari et al., 2019). Within decentralized curriculum models, project-based learning provides teachers with autonomy to design contextual learning experiences that connect academic knowledge with real-world challenges. Such approaches align with constructivist theories that emphasize active knowledge construction and authentic learning environments (Kholidi et al., 2022; Rohmah et al., 2019). Without adequate training and support, project work may lead to superficial learning outcomes.

However, curriculum decentralization also places significant responsibility on teachers as curriculum implementers. Research in comparative education highlights that pedagogical innovations such as project-based learning require strong instructional design skills, assessment literacy, and adequate professional development (Hashim et al., 2019; Prasetyani et al., 2024; Tai et al., 2022). This approach is particularly beneficial in early literacy and numeracy instruction. Nevertheless, highly structured pedagogical frameworks may constrain student agency and teacher creativity. In contexts where teacher preparation and school resources vary substantially, decentralized pedagogical frameworks may produce uneven learning outcomes. Without structured guidance and consistent training, project-based activities risk becoming superficial tasks rather than meaningful inquiry processes. This illustrates a common governance challenge in decentralized systems: balancing pedagogical innovation with implementation capacity.

In contrast, KSSR's mastery learning orientation reflects a more centralized curriculum governance model that prioritizes structured pedagogy and clear learning benchmarks. Mastery learning is supported by extensive empirical research demonstrating its effectiveness in improving academic achievement and reducing learning gaps when accompanied by systematic formative assessment (Hashim et al., 2019; Tai et al., 2022; Prasetyani et al., 2024). Within centralized systems, clearly defined instructional sequences and national standards are often designed to ensure consistency of learning outcomes across schools and regions.

Nevertheless, highly standardized pedagogical frameworks may also limit opportunities for teacher autonomy and student agency. Comparative education research indicates that strong instructional regulation can constrain exploratory learning and reduce the flexibility needed to respond to diverse classroom contexts (Samsul Hady et al., 2025; Supianto et al., 2023). When teaching strategies are tightly aligned with predetermined objectives and pacing guidelines, teachers may have fewer opportunities to implement creative or inquiry-based approaches that promote deeper conceptual engagement.

From a comparative education perspective, the contrast between *Kurikulum Merdeka* and KSSR reflects a broader policy tension between decentralization and standardization in curriculum governance. Decentralized pedagogical models tend to prioritize innovation, contextual responsiveness, and learner autonomy, whereas centralized systems emphasize reliability, accountability, and national consistency. These approaches represent different strategies for addressing the fundamental policy challenge of balancing educational quality with equity.

Contemporary pedagogical research increasingly advocates hybrid models that integrate the strengths of both approaches. Blended frameworks combining mastery learning with experiential and project-based strategies are considered effective in developing foundational competencies while also fostering higher-order thinking skills (OECD, 2022). Within this perspective, *Kurikulum Merdeka* may benefit from stronger instructional scaffolding and professional support systems to ensure the quality of project-based learning. Conversely, KSSR could expand opportunities for experiential learning and pedagogical flexibility to enhance student engagement and creativity. Achieving a balance between

structured mastery and experiential learning may therefore strengthen the overall effectiveness of curriculum implementation in both education systems.

Comparative Analysis of Assessment Systems

Overall, *Kurikulum Merdeka* offers greater flexibility in assessment practices, reflecting a curriculum governance orientation toward decentralization and teacher autonomy. Within assessment theory, such flexibility aligns with assessment-for-learning approaches that emphasize formative feedback, learner reflection, and continuous monitoring of progress (Marno et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2022). Narrative feedback and diagnostic assessment practices are intended to support individualized learning pathways and strengthen students' self-regulation. In decentralized curriculum systems, teachers play a central role in interpreting assessment evidence and adjusting instruction according to students' developmental needs.

However, governance models that rely heavily on teacher-driven assessment also face challenges related to reliability and consistency. Comparative education research indicates that decentralized assessment systems require strong teacher assessment literacy and effective moderation mechanisms to maintain comparability across schools (Farashaiyan & Amirkhiz, 2011). Without systematic professional support and collaborative moderation practices, differences in teacher judgment may result in uneven evaluation standards. In geographically diverse education systems, this issue may contribute to disparities in assessment quality and learning outcomes.

In contrast, Malaysia's KSSR reflects a more centralized assessment governance framework that prioritizes structured procedures, national benchmarks, and institutional accountability. The use of School-Based Assessment and Classroom Assessment under national guidelines allows learning progress to be monitored systematically while maintaining consistency across schools. From a comparative education perspective, centralized assessment systems are often designed to strengthen policy oversight, ensure comparability of results, and support large-scale educational monitoring (UNESCO, 2022).

Nevertheless, highly structured assessment systems may also generate unintended consequences. Studies on standardized assessment governance suggest that strong accountability mechanisms can increase administrative workload for teachers and intensify performance pressure on students (OECD, 2023). When assessment documentation and reporting requirements become extensive, teachers may devote significant time to administrative tasks rather than instructional improvement. In addition, strict benchmarking systems may reduce opportunities for formative feedback that supports individualized learning processes.

From a comparative education perspective, the contrast between *Kurikulum Merdeka* and KSSR reflects broader policy tensions between decentralization and standardization in assessment governance. Decentralized models prioritize professional judgment, formative feedback, and instructional responsiveness, while centralized systems emphasize reliability, comparability, and accountability at the system level. Each approach addresses different policy priorities related to educational quality and equity.

Contemporary assessment research increasingly advocates hybrid governance models that combine teacher autonomy with moderated standards and institutional oversight. Such systems maintain flexibility for formative assessment practices while ensuring reliability through professional moderation and shared evaluation criteria (OECD, 2023). Within this framework, *Kurikulum Merdeka* may benefit from stronger moderation and professional development mechanisms to enhance assessment reliability, whereas KSSR could further strengthen formative feedback practices to support individualized student development. Balancing these governance approaches may therefore improve both instructional quality and equity in assessment systems.

Strengths and Weaknesses of *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Indonesia) and KSSR (Malaysia)

The flexibility observed in *Kurikulum Merdeka* reflects broader shifts in curriculum governance toward decentralized and competency-based education systems. In curriculum theory, decentralized

governance models provide schools and teachers with greater autonomy to adapt learning processes to local contexts and diverse student needs. Flexible learning progressions are widely associated with differentiated instruction and inclusive education, as they allow teachers to adjust pacing according to learners' readiness and learning trajectories (Farashaiyan & Amirkhiz, 2011; Lathifah et al., 2025a). However, autonomy without adequate support can widen disparities in instructional quality. Teacher competence becomes a critical determinant of curriculum effectiveness. Studies emphasize the role of sustained professional development in supporting flexible curricula (Fullan, 2020). Without strong institutional support, flexibility may lead to inconsistency. Curriculum autonomy must therefore be balanced with structured guidance. International experiences show similar challenges. These findings align with comparative curriculum reform literature.

However, decentralization also introduces structural challenges. Research on curriculum governance indicates that autonomy without adequate institutional support may lead to disparities in instructional quality across schools (Fullan, 2020; Priestley et al., 2023). In decentralized systems, teacher competence, professional development opportunities, and school infrastructure become key determinants of curriculum effectiveness. Without sustained professional learning systems and clear implementation guidance, flexible curricula risk producing inconsistent classroom practices. These dynamics illustrate a common tension in decentralized reform: the need to balance professional autonomy with systemic support and policy coherence.

The integration of character education in Kurikulum Merdeka further reflects a holistic curriculum philosophy that seeks to connect cognitive development with ethical and civic formation. The Pancasila Student Profile functions as a normative framework guiding the integration of values across subject areas and learning experiences. Within holistic education theory, character development is considered more effective when embedded within authentic activities rather than taught as a separate subject (Lathifah et al., 2025b; Wijayanti & Fatmah, n.d.). Project-based and experiential learning enhance moral internalization. The Pancasila Student Profile provides a coherent ethical framework. Values are reinforced through action and reflection. Studies show that contextualized character education fosters civic responsibility (UNESCO, 2021). However, assessment of character outcomes remains complex. Clear indicators and teacher understanding are essential. Without clarity, implementation may become symbolic. These issues are widely discussed in moral education research. Nevertheless, the implementation of value-based education also raises governance and assessment challenges. Character outcomes are inherently complex and difficult to measure using conventional assessment systems. Comparative studies on moral education emphasize the importance of clear indicators, teacher understanding, and consistent evaluation frameworks to ensure meaningful implementation. Without clear operational guidelines, character education initiatives risk becoming symbolic policy rhetoric rather than deeply embedded educational practices.

Project-based learning institutionalized within Kurikulum Merdeka also reflects constructivist and inquiry-based pedagogical traditions that emphasize active knowledge construction and collaborative learning. Research demonstrates that authentic projects can promote higher-order thinking, creativity, and interdisciplinary understanding (Bell, 2020). From a governance perspective, the institutionalization of project-based learning represents an attempt to embed experiential learning within the formal curriculum structure. However, as with other decentralized innovations, the effectiveness of project-based learning depends strongly on teacher expertise in instructional design, scaffolding, and assessment (Hajar et al., 2026; Inui et al., 2025; Liew et al., 2025). Without sufficient professional development and structured support, projects may remain superficial activities rather than rigorous inquiry processes. These findings highlight the importance of aligning pedagogical innovation with teacher capacity-building initiatives in curriculum reform.

Implementation challenges observed in Kurikulum Merdeka also reflect broader patterns found in decentralized education systems. Comparative research indicates that increased curriculum autonomy often leads to greater variation in classroom practices and learning experiences (Priestley et al., 2023). Infrastructure disparities, particularly in digital learning environments, further complicate reform implementation. Digital-based curriculum initiatives require reliable technological

infrastructure, teacher digital competence, and institutional support systems (Selwyn, 2022). Without infrastructure investment, digital reform risks increasing inequity. Studies emphasize systemic alignment between curriculum, resources, and capacity (UNESCO, 2023). Curriculum reform cannot operate in isolation. Implementation success depends on ecosystem readiness. These findings reflect broader educational reform literature.

In contrast, Malaysia's KSSR reflects a more centralized curriculum governance model emphasizing standardization, coherence, and system-level accountability. Curriculum coherence theory suggests that clearly defined learning standards strengthen alignment between curriculum content, instructional practice, and assessment systems (Schmidt & Prawat, 2020). Standardization supports accountability and comparability. Teachers benefit from explicit instructional expectations. Students experience consistent learning opportunities nationwide. However, research cautions against excessive prescription. Over-standardization can reduce teacher agency (Biesta, 2021). Effective systems balance structure with flexibility. KSSR emphasizes reliability and control. This approach reflects traditional centralized governance models. Comparative studies highlight both strengths and limitations of such systems.

The mastery learning approach embedded in KSSR further reinforces this structured governance orientation. Mastery learning theory posits that students should achieve defined competencies before progressing to more advanced material, thereby strengthening foundational knowledge and reducing achievement gaps (Chua & Bong, 2024; Hajar et al., 2026; Hartini et al., 2023). Structured assessment supports targeted remediation. However, mastery learning requires sufficient instructional time. Excessive focus on benchmarks may increase student pressure. Balance between mastery and exploratory learning is necessary. Studies recommend integrating formative assessment with flexible pacing. These findings support cautious implementation of mastery models.

Nevertheless, centralized curriculum models also face limitations related to pedagogical flexibility. Research suggests that highly standardized instructional frameworks may constrain teacher agency and limit opportunities for adaptive teaching strategies. (Biesta, 2021; Priestley et al., 2023). In diverse classrooms where learners progress at different rates, rigid pacing structures may hinder differentiated instruction and inclusive educational practices.

KSSR's emphasis on early STEM education also reflects broader international policy priorities aimed at preparing students for participation in knowledge-based and technology-driven economies. Early exposure to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics has been associated with improved problem-solving skills and increased interest in STEM careers (Laila et al., 2025; Lestari et al., 2024; Pramukti et al., 2022). Teacher training is essential for meaningful integration. Studies advocate gradual and coherent STEM introduction. These insights align with STEM education research.

The issue of curriculum density identified in KSSR aligns with broader critiques of overloaded curriculum frameworks. When numerous subjects and objectives must be addressed within limited instructional time, teachers may prioritize content coverage rather than conceptual exploration. International curriculum reforms increasingly emphasize the importance of curriculum prioritization and content reduction to support deeper learning and critical thinking (Priestley et al., 2023). Students with varying abilities require adaptive strategies. Teachers struggle to personalize learning under strict standards. Inclusive education frameworks emphasize curricular adaptability (UNESCO, 2021). Hybrid curriculum models combining structure and autonomy show promise. KSSR prioritizes uniform outcomes. This tension reflects broader debates in curriculum design. Studies call for balanced governance models. These discussions are central in contemporary curriculum theory.

From a comparative education perspective, the contrast between Kurikulum Merdeka and KSSR reflects a broader policy tension between decentralization and standardization in curriculum governance. Decentralized systems prioritize flexibility, contextual adaptation, and professional autonomy, whereas centralized systems emphasize coherence, accountability, and consistent learning standards. Each governance approach addresses different policy priorities related to educational quality and equity. Curriculum density identified in KSSR aligns with critiques of content-heavy curricula. Research warns that overloaded curricula reduce depth of understanding (Lestari et al., 2024;

Shaari, 2017). Teachers prioritize coverage over conceptual learning. Students engage in surface learning strategies. Deep learning requires time for reflection and inquiry. International reforms increasingly focus on curriculum reduction. Streamlined curricula enhance conceptual mastery. Comparative studies recommend prioritizing essential knowledge. KSSR may benefit from rationalization. These conclusions are supported by global evidence.

Overall, contemporary curriculum scholarship increasingly advocates hybrid governance models that integrate the strengths of both approaches. Hybrid models combine clear national standards with guided pedagogical autonomy, enabling teachers to adapt learning processes while maintaining system-level coherence (Zhao, 2022). Within this framework, Kurikulum Merdeka may benefit from stronger professional support systems and implementation guidelines to ensure consistency, while KSSR could expand opportunities for pedagogical flexibility and interdisciplinary learning. Achieving a balanced integration of structure and autonomy may therefore strengthen the effectiveness, equity, and sustainability of curriculum reform in both education systems

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* and Malaysia's Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) represent contrasting yet complementary approaches to primary education reform, with the former emphasizing instructional flexibility, learner-centered pedagogy, project-based learning, and character development, and the latter prioritizing structured progression, mastery of foundational skills, and national standardization to ensure consistent and equitable outcomes. These differences reflect each country's broader educational philosophy and governance context, underscoring that curriculum effectiveness depends on alignment with local needs rather than a single universal model, while also revealing an ongoing policy tension between autonomy-driven innovation and standards-based accountability. The findings suggest that both systems can benefit from mutual learning: Indonesia should strengthen teacher professional development, assessment literacy, and equitable resource distribution to prevent disparities in implementation, whereas Malaysia could incorporate greater instructional flexibility, interdisciplinary approaches, and student-centered practices to enhance engagement and responsiveness to learner diversity. Although this study offers valuable comparative insights, its reliance on policy and document analysis limits its scope, and future research should incorporate empirical classroom-based evidence on teaching practices, student outcomes, and implementation challenges to better understand how these curriculum reforms translate into meaningful educational improvement.

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