Framing Multicultural Competence in ASEAN Teacher Preparation Policies: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Article information	Abstract
	This study examines how teacher preparation policies across ASEAN incorporate multicultural competence (MC), with two main objectives: (1) to analyze how the Southeast Asia Teacher Competency Framework (SEA-TCF) conceptualizes MC, and (2) to assess the extent to which this framework aligns with national teacher standards in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand. Guided by Gorski's (2009) model for multicultural teacher education (MTE) and Van Dijk's (2015) socio-cognitive discourse framework, this qualitative document analysis finds that both the SEA-TCF and national standards mainly emphasize cultural sensitivity and inclusive pedagogies—particularly through the SEA-TCF Competency 3: Community Engagement. While the SEA-TCF provides an intergovernmental standard that promotes multicultural competence, national standards reveal uneven institutionalization shaped by distinct sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Policy discourses across the region favour tolerance, harmony, and interpersonal respect, yet seldom advance toward the more critical and transformative dimensions—teaching in sociopolitical contexts (TSC) and teaching as resistance and counter-hegemonic practice (TR). The findings suggest that ASEAN's teacher education policies remain within a liberal paradigm marked by administrative coherence but limited critical reflexivity. The study calls for regional and national policy reforms that embed equity and social justice into teacher education and develop teachers' capacity to act as change agents in increasingly diverse educational systems.

INTRODUCTION

Amid increasing migration and regional integration, ASEAN has become one of the most culturally heterogeneous areas in the world, shaped by deep ethnic, linguistic, and religious plurality. For example, Indonesia is home to more than 370 ethnic groups (Amalee, 2007, as cited in Rachmawati et al, 2014); while Vietnam officially recognises 54 ethnic groups (Vietnam Government Portal, n.d.). Economic integration has further diversified classrooms across the region; in Thailand, over 117,949 students from neighboring Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos are now enrolled in public schools (Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2023). Teachers are increasingly expected to educate learners from diverse socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds, raising two questions: How can teachers be adequately prepared to support

such learners? And how can education systems promote inclusion and mutual respect in plural societies?

A key response is to develop MC among teachers. Defined as a mix of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and relationships, MC is foundational to inclusive pedagogy and educational equity (Hsiao, 2015; Leung & Hue, 2020; Spanierman et al., 2011). Global frameworks such as Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education (SDG 4) highlight that achieving inclusive and equitable quality education depends on empowering teachers to respond effectively to diversity. Policy bodies such as UNESCO (2019; 2024) and the OECD (2023) have called for teacher education systems that explicitly address diversity and inclusion. The UNESCO Global Report on Teachers (2024) specifically underscores the need for teacher training that emphasizes pedagogical quality and responsiveness to cultural and social diversity. Despite these calls, many teachers across ASEAN report limited preparation for multicultural classrooms. This ongoing gap between classroom realities and teacher readiness underscores the urgent need to systematically embed MC within teacher education systems.

Although MTE has been widely studied in Western contexts (e.g., Gay, 2015; Hammond, 2015; Pimentel, 2017), there is relatively little research on how MC is conceptualized within Southeast Asian policy frameworks. Regional initiatives, such as the SEA-TCF developed by SEAMEO, acknowledge the importance of diversity and inclusion in theory. However, the degree to which MC is clearly defined, operationalized, and aligned with national teacher standards remains underexplored. As Umali et al. (2023) point out, ASEAN's vision for educational integration necessitates teacher preparation systems that equip educators with competencies to respond to the demands of increasing regional integration and diverse classroom environments. Nonetheless, national disparities, fragmented policy frameworks, and limited cross-cultural training continue to challenge this vision. Additionally, Trisnawati et al. (2020) observe that understandings of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in the ASEAN countries often remain narrow, frequently limited to ethnic representations. They also highlight how high-power distance between teachers and students contributes to teacher-centred approaches that overlook student diversity.

These challenges are also prominent in English language education, where multilingual English teachers contend with the native-speakerism ideology and are valued based on their proximity to native-speaker norms rather than on their unique pedagogical strengths (Hiasa, 2025). While ELF textbooks may include multicultural content, teachers are not always adequately equipped to utilize these cultural references effectively (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). Without clear policy guidance on MC, many lack the pedagogical tools to foster inclusive and equity-focused teaching. Studies further indicate that although pre-service EFL teachers may understand intercultural competence in theory, its practical application is limited by curricular and structural constraints (Nindya et al., 2022). Embedding MC in teacher education is therefore crucial for educators operating at the intersections of language, culture, and equity.

This study explores how MC is constructed and integrated into teacher education policy discourse within ASEAN. It examines the SEA-TCF and national teacher professional standards in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand to determine how these frameworks

define a multiculturally competent teacher—whether as a culturally aware practitioner, a technically skilled professional, or an advocate for social justice. Using MTE framework and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the research investigates how regional and national standards incorporate multicultural principles and mirror institutional priorities and the broader goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Specifically, it analyses how MC is interpreted within the SEA-TCF, how closely national teacher standards align with this view, and what dominant ideologies influence policy discussions about MTE across these frameworks. The upcoming sections cover the theoretical background of MTE and policy discourse, describe the research method, review findings from regional and national standards, and conclude with recommendations for policy reform and teacher preparation in ASEAN.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Developing MC through MTE

MTE is a broad and evolving field without a single defining description. It is frequently used interchangeably with terms such as inclusive teacher education, equity-focused teacher education, or teacher education for diversity (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Gorski, 2009; UNESCO, 2019). Despite differences in terminology, these approaches share a fundamental goal: preparing teachers to work effectively in culturally diverse classrooms and to promote equity and social justice through their teaching.

A key goal of MTE is to enhance MC among both pre-service and in-service teachers. MC encompasses knowledge, pedagogical skills, attitudes, and relational abilities required for inclusive teaching (Hsiao, 2015; Leung & Hue, 2020; Spanierman et al., 2011). Research consistently links MC with teacher self-efficacy and the capacity to engage diverse learners (Oryan & Ravid, 2019; Savolainen et al., 2020). However, recent scholarship contends that competence must extend beyond interpersonal awareness to include critical, reflective, and emotional engagement with inequity. A review of 103 studies on initial teacher education found that most programs still privilege pragmatic skills and personal awareness while neglecting deeper critical multiculturalism (Keles & Munthe, 2025). Genuine competence, the authors suggest, involves discomfort and self-reflection on privilege rather than merely appreciating cultural differences. Likewise, a meta-review of 209 studies identified three orientations in teacher preparation—teaching about diversity (transmitting facts), teaching to diversity (adapting pedagogy), and teaching for diversity (transforming for social justice) (Rowan et al., 2021)—highlighting the field's move from technical skills toward critical consciousness.

This shift is particularly relevant in Southeast Asia, where diversity intersects with hierarchical classroom traditions. CRT has become an essential bridge for developing MC. Based on ten studies across ASEAN, Trisnawati et al. (2020) demonstrate that CRT extends beyond ethnicity or culture to include adaptive strategies that help teachers understand learners and create inclusive classroom communities. Their review also underscores that CRT helps reduce the high-power distance characteristic of ASEAN classrooms by encouraging dialogue, mutual respect, and group interaction. Through these practices, CRT transforms traditional hierarchies

into opportunities for equity and meaningful engagement. Similar patterns are observed in research on culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). A review of 134 empirical studies reveals that most remain descriptive and race-neutral, while a growing but still smaller body of work deliberately highlights marginalized epistemologies and challenges structural inequities (Chang & Viesca, 2022). Even in policy-driven systems like Australia, preservice teachers often report inadequately prepared for multicultural classrooms due to a significant gap between policy goals and classroom practice (Ji et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies trace MTE's evolution from promoting cultural awareness to fostering equity literacy—the ability to recognise, respond to, and redress inequity (Posti-Ahokas & Janhonen-Abruquah, 2021). Within this framework, MC as a fixed personal trait but as a dynamic, context-dependent capacity shaped by institutional structures, emotional engagement, and ongoing reflection (Chang & Viesca, 2022; Ji et al., 2025; Posti-Ahokas & Janhonen-Abruquah, 2021).

While the previous section traced the conceptual and pedagogical evolution of MTE, the next section situates these developments within global and regional policy contexts to demonstrate how MC has been embedded in teacher professional frameworks.

Global and regional perspectives on MC

Globally, teacher competence is increasingly seen as essential for inclusive and fair education. The United Nations' SDG 4 emphasizes qualified teachers as key drivers of educational change. International bodies like UNESCO and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2022) endorse frameworks linking professional competence with collaboration, ethical reflection, and social responsibility. Inclusion is therefore viewed as transforming school cultures rather than simply adapting marginalized students to existing norms (Florian & Camedda, 2019). In Europe, the competence framework for inclusive education by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2022) describes inclusion as a shared moral and institutional commitment, while the PROMISE Project documents educators' shared common professional dilemmas, demonstrating that inclusive teaching relies on collaborative professional learning and interpersonal support rather than individual efforts (Beaton et al., 2021). Nevertheless, inconsistencies persist. For example, studies in Iceland reveal that teacher training still frames inclusion through diagnostic or deficit-based categories, ignoring broader sociocultural diversity (Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2019).

Building on these developments, the institutionalization of multicultural and inclusive teaching has increasingly taken shape teacher professional standards. These standards have become crucial policy tools that define, regulate, and communicate what constitutes teacher quality (Santoro & Kennedy, 2016). They serve as benchmarks of competence and ethical commitment, offering frameworks for curriculum development, professional learning, and evaluation throughout a teacher's career (Jeder, 2022). More than mere technical guidelines, they also carry ideological significance—prescribing the moral and pedagogical dispositions that shape how the 'good teacher' is envisioned within various national contexts (Santoro & Kennedy, 2016). Comparative analyses show that while such standards often include inclusive language like "all students," they explicitly address cultural or linguistic differences, thereby obscuring systemic inequities. Conversely, when diversity is directly acknowledged—such as in Australia's

standards emphasising responsiveness to linguistic and cultural diversity, or New Zealand's focus on biculturalism—professional standards can formalise multicultural principles and affirm equity as a fundamental professional value (Jeder, 2022; Santoro & Kennedy, 2016).

Regionally, Southeast Asia has adopted these global priorities through the SEA-TCF, developed by the Teachers' Council of Thailand with SEAMEO partners and endorsed by ASEAN education ministries in 2018. The framework outlines four key areas—knowing what to teach, helping students learn, engaging in the community, and pursuing continuous self-development—and emphasizes the importance of respecting diversity as a core competency, encouraging teachers to value differences and practice inclusion. By formally including multicultural awareness within professional standards, the SEA-TCF marks the region's first coordinated effort to incorporate multicultural and inclusive skills into teacher policy. However, implementation remains inconsistent. Research indicates that ASEAN teacher-education systems still primarily view inclusion as support for students with special needs (Hosshan et al., 2020). Across ASEAN countries, training continues to prioritize moral education and classroom management over critical engagement with diversity (Trisnawati et al., 2020). While regional harmonization efforts have improved structural comparability, they have not yet achieved pedagogical equity. Scholars advocate for competency-based standards that move beyond policy alignment, fostering shared commitments to social justice and intercultural understanding (Umali et al., 2023). Empirical evidence further reveals that preservice teachers often interpret diversity through assimilationist or color-blind lenses (Smits & Janssenswillen, 2020), echoing Finnish research that highlights limited acknowledgment of structural inequities (Posti-Ahokas & Janhonen-Abruquah, 2021).

Across ASEAN, higher-education initiatives have mainly focused on qualification framework and quality assurance as key tools for regional harmonization (Dhirathiti & Sonsri, 2019). While these efforts enhance institutional comparability, they seldom incorporate explicit pedagogical or moral commitments to equity. The gap between regional structural harmonization and classroom transformation highlights the need to align regional frameworks with the deeper ethical objectives of inclusive education. The implementation of MTE worldwide and within Southeast Asia remains uneven. UNESCO (2019) warns that inclusion is still seen as an add-on rather than a foundational principle of teacher preparation. Therefore, achieving genuine MC therefore requires systemic reform that integrates diversity into curricula, encourages educators' critical reflection, and fosters ongoing professional learning communities.

Although there has been significant progress in understanding MTE globally, little research has examined how MC is expressed in ASEAN's regional or national teacher-education policies. Most existing studies mainly focus on program-level practices or teacher development, leaving policy-level discourses less explored. This study addresses that gap by analysing how MC is portrayed in the SEA-TCF and five national teacher-education standards, using Gorski's (2009) framework and Van Dijk's (2015) CDA to reveal underlying ideological assumptions and structural arrangements shaping MTE in Southeast Asia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study integrates Gorski's (2009) framework for MTE with CDA to analyze how MC is portrayed in the SEA-TCF and the national teacher-education standards of five ASEAN countries—Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand. These methods enable both structural and interpretive analyses of policy language, linking the ideological richness of multicultural discourses to their pedagogical purpose.

Gorski's framework outlines MTE across five progressive levels—ranging from surface cultural awareness to transformative, justice-oriented practice. It provides a continuum for evaluating whether policies see MC as cultural appreciation or as social-justice action. Further research has implemented Gorski's typology in teacher-education settings. For instance, Smits and Janssenswillen (2020) used it to examine pre-service teachers' attitudes towards ethnic diversity in Belgium and Morocco, showing that most stayed within assimilationist stages. Similarly, Posti-Ahokas and Janhonen-Abruquah (2021) used Gorski's concept of equity literacy to investigate Finnish student teachers' development towards structural awareness. These studies underscore the framework's ongoing significance for analysing the depth and ideological perspective of multicultural engagement in teacher training.

Gorski's framework outlines five progressive levels that examine the depth of MTE ideology. Level 1, teaching about "others" (TA), introduces to the cultures and traditions of marginalised groups. While this approach aims to raise awareness, it often reinforces cultural stereotypes, perpetuates deficit perspectives, and maintains assimilationist norms. Gorski (2009) critiques this level for using "marginalizing language" and portraying society as homogeneous. Acar-Ciftci (2019) similarly argues that TA aligns with conservative multiculturalism, which expects minority students to conform to dominant norms. Oryan and Ravid (2019) find that pre-service teachers often start here, viewing diversity as a fixed cultural trait rather than a systemic issue. Level 2, teaching with cultural sensitivity and tolerance (TCS), goes tokenism by encouraging educators to reflect on their personal biases and foster inclusive attitudes. It promotes empathy and respect, rarely challenges institutional power or structural inequality (Gorski, 2009). Research indicates that affective growth occurs at this stage, yet engagement with systemic injustice remains limited (Oryan & Ravid, 2019). Level 3, teaching with multicultural competencies (TMC), highlights practical skills for inclusive teaching, such as differentiated instruction, curriculum adaptation, and managing culturally diverse classrooms. Gorski (2009) values its pragmatic focus but warns that, without a critical foundation, it risks reducing multicultural education (ME) to mere technique. Teacher efficacy generally to improve at this level, though many remain hesitant to confront structural inequities (Sharma & Nuttal, 2016). Level 4, teaching in sociopolitical contexts or TSC, shifts attention to systems of oppression and how schools reflect and reproduce social inequalities. This stage develops what Gorski calls equity literacy, urging educators to examine positionality and engage with issues of power. Some pre-service teachers begin to develop this awareness, though progress can be uneven and emotionally demanding (Oryan & Ravid, 2019). Finally, Level 5, teaching as resistance and counter-hegemonic practice or TR, is the most transformative. It sees teachers as activists challenging dominant ideologies and advocating for justice in education. This level aligns with Sleeter and Grant's (2008) concept of multicultural social justice education, emphasising

community-based learning and collective action. Although rarely institutionalised, well-designed programmes can nurture early commitments to TR (Acar-Ciftci, 2019; Oryan & Ravid, 2019).

Although Gorski's model clarifies pedagogical orientation, it does not fully explain how ideology and power operate through policy discourse. To address this, the study integrates CDA, particularly Van Dijk's (2015) socio-cognitive model, which links language use (discourse), mental representations (cognition), and social structures (society). This approach highlights how shared beliefs of individuals and institutions mediate the relationship between text and power. The model indicates that discourse both reflects and influences collective understandings, allowing analysis of how power and ideology are reproduced through policy language. Within this context, CDA considers discourse as a social practice that can legitimize or conceal inequality. In this education policy, it reveals how terms such as diversity, inclusion, or quality function ideologically—either supporting harmony-oriented narratives or hiding structural inequities.

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative document analysis, a method that enables the systematic interpretation of existing texts to uncover meanings, structures, and patterns within discourse (Morgan, 2022). This approach is especially suitable for analyzing official educational policy documents, as they offer stable, accessible, and context-rich data that reflect institutional values and priorities. As a result, the study examined how MC is conceptualized in both the SEA-TCF and national teacher professional standards from five ASEAN countries—Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand.

To guide the analysis, this study combined two analytical tools: Gorski's (2009) five-level framework of MTE and Van Dijk's (2015) CDA. Gorski's framework offers a conceptual typology of multicultural competence engagement in teacher education, ranging from superficial recognition to critical transformation. The five progressive levels—TA, TCS, TMC, TSC, and TR—were operationalized into distinct coding categories for this research. These enable the researcher to determine how far each policy progresses beyond cultural awareness toward structural critique and transformative praxis. CDA, rooted in Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, sees discourse as both a product and producer of social cognition, power, and ideology. Through CDA, the study explored how policy language constructs social actors (teachers, learners, minorities), legitimizes certain values, and reproduces or challenges dominant ideologies such as nationalism, meritocracy, and harmony. Integrating Gorski's typology with CDA thus allows for a connection between what policies say about MC and how they communicate it, revealing the ideological forces influencing regional and national approaches.

Document selection

Policy documents were collected between November 2023 and January 2024 through targeted online searches using keywords such as "Southeast Asia Teacher Competency Framework,"

"teacher professional standards," and "Vietnam teacher competencies." Only documents officially published or endorsed by national education ministries or equivalent regulatory bodies were chosen. Priority was given to the latest publicly available versions in English or official English translations to ensure consistency across countries.

The final dataset included six documents considered foundational to teacher education policy development within their respective contexts (Table 1). Chronologically, most national standards—Malaysia (2009), Singapore (2009), and Indonesia (2005)—precede the adoption of the regional SEA-TCF (2018). Vietnam's (2018) and Thailand's (2019) frameworks emerged around the same time or shortly after the SEA-TCF. This sequence suggests that the SEA-TCF largely reflects and harmonizes pre-existing national standards rather than dictating them. In other words, the regional framework acts as an aspirational reference that consolidates shared regional priorities while recognizing each country's policy autonomy.

Table 1

Policy documents analyzed

Document Name	Country/Region	Year
Southeast Asia Teacher Competency Framework (SEA-TCF)	ASEAN (Regional)	2018
Malaysian Teacher Standard (MTS)	Malaysia	2009
Teacher Education Model for the 21st Century (TEM21)	Singapore	2009
Teacher and Lecturer Law (Law No. 14/2005) (TLL)	Indonesia	2005
Circular No. 20/2018/TT-BGDDT on Professional Standards for Teachers of General Education Institutions (PSTAEV)	Vietnam	2018
Teaching Professional Standards of the Teachers Council of Thailand (TPSTCT)	Thailand	2019

While these documents offer valuable insights into ASEAN nations' formal strategies to prepare teachers for MC, they have certain limitations. As official policy texts, they may not reflect localized practices or capture the evolving dynamics of teacher education reforms in action. Additionally, they do not include the lived experiences and perspectives of educators responsible for implementing these standards. To address these limitations, the study uses a critical and systematic document analysis, guided by Gorski's (2009) framework and CDA, to examine how MC is discursively constructed and ideologically embedded within policy texts.

Data analysis

The analysis used Van Dijk's (2015) socio-cognitive model of CDA, which see discourse as both shaping and being shaped by social cognition, institutional ideologies, and power structures. CDA was selected for its ability to show how policy language either reproduces or challenges dominant beliefs about inclusion and professionalism. Four interconnected dimensions guided interpretation: contextual, textual, cognitive, and ideological.

In the first phase, structural coding identified statements explicitly or implicitly addressing diversity, inclusion, equity, or social justice. Gorski's (2009) five-level framework of MTE—TA, TCS, TMC, TSC, and TR—was operationalized as analytical codes. This enabled cross-national comparison of how deeply MC was embedded in policy, from surface awareness to transformative practice. Each level was translated into clear criteria: for example, "recognize cultural festivals"

was coded as TA, "respect cultural difference" as TCS, and "inclusive pedagogy" or "linguistic diversity" as TMC. Less frequent statements such as "addressing discrimination" or "challenging inequality" were coded under TSC, while explicit critiques of injustice were classified as TR. The coded segments were then interpreted through Van Dijk's (2015) model, which links discourse, cognition, and social structure, to reveal how institutional beliefs mediate text and power.

In the second phrase, the four CDA dimensions then structured interpretation. First, contextual analysis situated each policy document within its national or regional framework, considering its production background, policy goals, and sociopolitical factors. This helped identify structural forces influencing how MC is integrated into broader educational agendas. Second, textual analysis explored how diversity-related terms (e.g., inclusion, equity, respect, difference) were used throughout the documents. The focus was on lexical choices, thematic patterns, and rhetorical strategies employed to frame teacher roles, student diversity, and the objectives of teacher education. Third, cognitive dimension analyzed how teachers, learners, and cultural identities were represented—whether teachers appeared as passive implementers or equity advocates, and whether students were depicted through deficit, neutral, or empowering perspectives. It also assessed the presence or absence of marginalized voices. Finally, ideological analysis examined the connections between MC and dominant narratives such as teacher professionalism, national identity, and educational equity. This indicates which values and interests were legitimized or obscured.

After coding, a comparative synthesis examined similarities and divergences between national standards and the SEA-TCF, highlighting local priorities and ideological tensions. Following qualitative document analysis guidelines (Morgan, 2022), reflexive memos documented analytical decisions, and triangulation across documents strengthened credibility. In line with CDA principles, the researcher adopted an engaged, reflexive stance, recognizing how power and ideology operate through language while ensuring interpretations remained contextually grounded and theoretically coherent.

FINDINGS

This section presents findings from a document analysis of how MC is conceptualized and integrated into the SEA-TCF and the national teacher education standards of five ASEAN countries: Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand. Because most national frameworks were developed before the 2018 introduction of the SEA-TCF, the regional framework largely reflects—rather than dictates—existing national approaches. The analysis therefore examines the SEA-TCF both as a harmonizing and aspirational policy reference. The findings are organized into three interrelated themes: (1) the inclusion of MC in professional teacher standards, (2) dominant approaches to MC across national and regional frameworks, and (3) contextual framing of MC.

The inclusion of MC in professional teacher standards

This theme investigates how MC is incorporated into the SEA-TCF and the national teacher professional standards of five ASEAN countries: Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand. In this study, MC is viewed as a multidimensional concept encompassing four main areas: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and relationships. The analysis evaluates whether and how MC is explicitly or implicitly integrated within each framework and identifies the specific standard categories in which it is addressed.

Although the six frameworks analyzed—consisting of one regional framework (i.e., SEA-TCF) and five national teacher standards—differ in structural organization and emphasis, they all serve as authoritative references for teacher preparation, professional development, and assessment. Some are structured around three domains, others around four. The following table provides a comparative summary of the presence or absence of MC across the standard categories in each framework. It offers a cross-national perspective on the integration of diversity-related expectations in teacher education policy.

Table 2
MC reflected in regional and national teacher standards

Documents / Country	Standards Reflecting ME Approaches
SEA-TCF (ASEAN)	Know and understand what I teach (X), Help my students learn ($\checkmark$), Engage the community ($\checkmark$), Become a better teacher every day ($\checkmark$)
MTS (Malaysia)	1. Professional practices ($\checkmark$), 2. Knowledge and understanding (X), 3. Teaching and learning (X)
TEM21 (Singapore)	1. Professional practices ($\checkmark$), 2. Leadership and management (X), 3. Personal effectiveness ($\checkmark$)
TLL (Indonesia)	1. Teaching competence (X), 2. Personal competence ($\checkmark$), 3. Social competence ($\checkmark$), 4. Professional competence ($\checkmark$)
PSTAEV (Vietnam)	1. Political attributes (X), 2. Professional ethics ($\checkmark$), 3. Personal conduct (X), 4. Preservation and protection of professional ethics standards
TPSTCT (Thailand)	1. Knowledge and professional experience (X), 2. Work performance ($\checkmark$), 3. Personal conduct (X)

Notes: $\checkmark$ = Present X = Not Present

In the SEA-TCF, MC is explicitly reflected in three out of four standard domains— "Help my students learn," "Engage the community," and "Become a better teacher every day." However, it is absent from the domain "Know and understand what I teach," suggesting that MC is not embedded in subject-matter knowledge or curriculum content. This pattern emphasizes teachers' interpersonal conduct, community relationships, and professional development, rather than curriculum or disciplinary knowledge. For example, under Standard 2 (Help my students learn), teachers are encouraged to "integrate students' needs, preferences, language, and developmental stages into learning experiences" and to "ensure equal opportunities for all students to learn." Standard 3 (Engage the community) includes directives to "invite parents and guardians to participate in their children's learning activities" and to "value each individual as a human being despite differences." In addition, Standard 4 (Become a better teacher every day) promotes inclusive and empathetic communication, instructing teachers to

"speak, respond, and listen to others with respect and generosity," to "be open to diverse perspectives" and to "consider students'diversity and identities." These statements collectively demonstrate the inclusion of MC across several interpersonal, affective, and relational dimensions of teacher professionalism, yet leave its curricular and structural dimensions largely unexplored.

The analysis of teacher professional standards across five ASEAN countries reveals varying levels of MC integration, both in scope and depth of understanding. Indonesia shows the most extensive incorporation of MC, integrating it into personal, social, and professional areas. These are closely linked to the national ideology of Pancasila, which promotes unity in diversity. In Indonesia, MC is viewed as vital to a teacher's ethical duties, collaboration skills, and teaching practice. This broad approach indicates a policy perspective that sees diversity as integral to teacher identity and teaching effectiveness, although it remains a largely liberal, than critical multicultural paradigm. Singapore also presents a relatively comprehensive view of MC, especially in the realms of professional practice and personal effectiveness. The focus is on teachers' adaptability, interpersonal sensitivity, and ethical behavior. These traits are regarded as essential to working effectively in diverse classrooms. While these policies show progress toward sociocultural awareness, they do not extend to structural critique or activist involvement. Conversely, Malaysia's framework mainly positions MC within professional conduct standards. The standards highlight teachers' ethical duties, fairness, and moral behavior, reflecting a strong normative stance. However, this approach does not include developing an inclusive curriculum or differentiated teaching methods. Diversity is primarily acknowledged as an ethical ideal rather than as a pedagogical strategy. As a result, the framework adopts a procedural and instrumental tone—prioritizing harmony and compliance over fostering critical reflection or transformative engagement with diversity in instruction and assessment. Vietnam's framework similarly demonstrates limited MC integration, appearing solely within the domain of professional ethics. Policy language stresses fairness, empathy, and moral behavior. However, there is little focus on addressing students' cultural and social identities, such as ethnicity, religion, and language. Thailand's framework shows a comparable trend, with MC mentioned under the work performance. The emphasis is on respectful relationships with students and communities, indicating a basic recognition of diversity. However, it offers no substantive guidance on how teachers should adapt pedagogy to serve ethnolinguistically diverse learners or overcome structural barriers.

Dominant approaches to MC across regional and national frameworks

Building on the previous theme's exploration of how MC is distributed across teacher professional standards, this section examines the nature and depth of MC approaches embedded in the SEA-TCF and five national frameworks, drawing on Gorski's (2009) five-level typology. These include TA, TCS, TMC, TSC, and TR. This analytical framework highlights the pedagogical orientations and ideological commitments that underpin teacher education policies in ASEAN.

Table 3

Summary of dominant approaches to MC

Documents	Dominant Approaches	Examples of Identified Key Phrases
SEA-TCF (ASEAN)	TCS, TMC	Create a safe learning space, respect each other, integrate students' needs, preferences, and language into learning, and foster cooperative learning.
MTS (Malaysia)	TCS, TMC	Avoid discrimination based on differences, promote empathy and harmony, integrate diverse student needs, and foster collaborative learning.
TEM21 (Singapore)	TCS, TMC, TSC	Respect diverse backgrounds, modify teaching to accommodate diverse learners, and commit to social justice and equality.
TLL (Indonesia)	TCS, TMC	Promote inclusivity, respect students regardless of their background, and ensure equality in religious education competencies.
PSTAEV (Vietnam)	TCS	Respect the dignity of learners, demonstrate empathy and fairness, and foster tolerance and generosity.
TPSTCT (Thailand)	TCS	Accept the differences of individual learners, cultivate relationships with diverse communities, and promote inclusive practices.

As shown in Table 3, across the six frameworks analyzed, approaches to MC converge around the middle levels of Gorski's model—TCS and TMC—while higher levels (TSC and TR) remain largely absent. Every framework demonstrates attention to interpersonal sensitivity, inclusion, and tolerance, yet only Singapore's standards explicitly engage with the sociopolitical dimensions of diversity.None of the frameworks reflect the most critical or activist level, TR, which calls for resistance to systemic inequities. Likewise, none exhibits the superficial characteristics of TA. This suggests that tokenistic or celebratory multiculturalism has largely been avoided.

The SEA-TCF mainly aligns with Gorski's second and third levels of MTE—TCS and TMC—especially through Competency 2 (Helping My Students Learn) and Competency 3 (Engaging the Community). These areas focus inclusion, responding to learners' needs, and building cooperative partnerships with families and communities. For example, under Competency 2, teachers are expected to "integrate students' needs, preferences, language, and developmental stages into learning experiences" and to "ensure equal opportunities for all students to learn," both of which demonstrate cultural responsiveness and differentiated pedagogy aligned with TMC. Competency 3 further urges educators to "value each individual as a human being despite differences" and to "invite parents and guardians to participate in their children's learning activities," reflecting TCS through interpersonal respect and inclusive engagement.

However, the SEA-TCF does not address structural inequality, sociopolitical critique, or justice-oriented pedagogies—core components of TSC or TR. The framework advocates for harmony, equity, and cultural respect, but remains silent on issues such as institutional discrimination, historical marginalization, or redistributing power. Its liberal stance is also apparent in phrases such as "create a safe learning space," "respect cultural diversity," and "build partnerships with families"—statements that encourage respectful inclusion without confronting dominant cultural narratives or demanding for structural change.

Across the five national frameworks, TCS and TMC stand out as the most prominent approaches. Malaysia's MTS framework mainly reflects Gorski's TCS level, with some TMC elements. This coding is based on systematic analysis of the framework's focus on interpersonal harmony and respect for individual rather than structural critique. TCS orientation is clear in phrases such as "promote empathy and harmony" and directives that stress tolerance and acceptance. The framework also shows TMC characteristics through statements such as "integrate diverse student needs and foster collaborative learning," which suggest pedagogical adaptation. However, there is no evidence of analysing inequality, sociopolitical critique, or justice-oriented pedagogies that would point to engagement with TSC. Consequently, Malaysia's standards reflect a liberal multicultural paradigm that supports inclusive relationships while sidestepping challenges to dominant power structures.

Singapore's TEM21 demonstrates the most comprehensive multicultural engagement among the five national frameworks, spanning TCS, TMC, and uniquely incorporating TSC elements. This classification is based on its multi-layered approach to diversity, which includes interpersonal respect, pedagogical adaptation, and social justice commitments. TCS dimension appears in phrases such as "respect diverse backgrounds," emphasising tolerance across cultural differences. The framework advances to TMC through directives like "modify teaching to accommodate diverse learners," requiring concrete pedagogical responsiveness. Most notably, Singapore is the only case that explicitly reflects TSC through the directive to "commit to social justice and equality," acknowledging the sociopolitical dimensions of education. However, there is no evidence of TR, such as calls for systemic dismantling or radical institutional transformation. Overall, Singapore represents the most advanced regional example of MC, though it remains situated within a reformist rather than transformative paradigm.

Indonesia's TLL operates primarily at the TCS level with selected TMC integration. This coding reflects the framework's focus on universal respect and non-discrimination, alongside specific provisions for religious diversity. The TCS focus is evident in phrases like "respect students regardless of their background," which promote tolerance without demanding cultural adaptation. TMC elements appear in more targeted directives such as "ensure equality in religious education competencies," which suggest pedagogical responsiveness to Indonesia's religious pluralism. The inclusion of six major religions (Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism) underscores a commitment to institutional inclusion at the TMC level. Nonetheless, the framework does not contain structural critique, social justice discourse, or resistance-oriented goals that would qualify as TSC or TR. Indonesia's framework thus aligns with a liberal multicultural model centred on harmony and accommodation, without challenging dominant social hierarchies.

Vietnam's PSTAEV operates predominantly at the TCS level, with minimal evidence of multicultural engagement beyond moral and interpersonal guidance. This orientation is based on its emphasis on universal moral values rather than cultural specificity or pedagogical adaptation. Phrases such as "demonstrate empathy and fairness" and "foster tolerance and generosity" promote respectful interpersonal behavior grounded in universalist principles. The framework's prioritization of moral character development reflects TCS characteristics, but there lacks indicators of TMC-level pedagogical strategies, TSC-level structural critique, or

TR-level transformative commitments. This absence aligns Vietnam's standards with a colorblind ideological orientation—affirming shared human values while neglecting cultural identities, social context, and systemic inequalities. The framework remains depoliticized, treating diversity as a matter of individual ethics rather than educational response.

Thailand's TPSTCT also mainly operates at the TCS level, with limited focus on MC. This classification relies on the framework's emphasis on tolerance and community relationships without corresponding pedagogical or structural commitments. TCS features are shown in phrases like "accept the differences of individual learners" and "cultivating relationships with diverse communities," which promote openness to diversity through relational, rather than instructional means However, there is no evidence of pedagogical adaptation (i.e., TMC), structural critique (i.e., TSC), or resistance-oriented practices (i.e., TR). Thailand's standards thus reflect a harmony-focused and depoliticized approach that values coexistence but avoids addressing institutional inequalities or power dynamics. Similar to Vietnam, this indicates a broader regional trend toward liberal ME that prioritizes social cohesion over critical educational transformation.

Overall, the findings indicate that TCS and TMC dominate across all six frameworks, demonstrating a regional dedication to liberal MC centered on inclusive pedagogy and respectful classroom relationships. The lack of TA suggests that diversity is no longer seen as peripheral. However, the near-completed absence of TSC and the total lack of TR reveal a continuing gap between superficial inclusion and transformative, justice-focused multicultural practice.

Contextual framing of ME

The regional framework: Aspiration vs. reality

The SEA-TCF presents a regional perspective focused on inclusivity, learner-centered approaches, and CRP. Its multicultural orientation focuses on emphasizing teaching with cultural sensitivity, inclusiveness, and responsiveness to learners' diverse backgrounds. However, as Nagy (2013) points out, Southeast Asian multiculturalism often operates within a state-centric framework, prioritizing social cohesion, nation-building, and migration management over structural change. As the result, while the SEA-TCF defines aspirational competencies, it mainly aligns with the lower levels of Gorski's (2009) MTE framework—TCS and TMC—and shows limited evidence of the more critical levels: TSC and TR.

This omission highlights wider regional tensions between harmony and justice. While multicultural rhetoric gains support, transformative and justice-oriented education remains difficult to achieve. National reinterpretations of the SEA-TCF domestic priorities further increase the gap between goals and reality, leading to diverse approaches in framing and implementing MC. Importantly, the ways in which MC is conceptualized and put into practice in ASEAN countries are influenced by specific local contexts, including the composition of national minorities, indigenous groups, and migration patterns. These contextual factors significantly affect how each country understands and applies SEA-TCF principles.

National patterns: Unity over transformation

Malaysia: The paradox of preferentialism

Malaysia's teacher education framework highlights the tension between ethnic recognition and structural exclusion, shaped by a highly stratified national context. As of 2020, Malaysia's population was 32.7 million, comprising Bumiputra (69.6%), Chinese (22.6%), Indians (6.8%), and indigenous peoples (13.8%), including groups such as the Orang Asli, Anak Negeri, and Dayak. Additionally, Malaysia hosts over 3.4 million migrant workers, primarily from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar, adding further layers to its ethno-religious complexity. This demographic diversity is managed through a state-supported model of multiculturalism based on Bumiputra affirmative action. While the Malaysia's MTS promote inter-ethnic tolerance and understanding, they exist within a legal and ideological system that privileges Malay-Muslim identity as central to national unity. As Ibrahim et al. (2011) explain, Malaysia's education system operates as a "contestation site" where multiculturalism remains "never a finished project" (p. 1009). Although the Ethnic Relations course is mandatory, it is mainly symbolic and lacks critical engagement with historical injustice, power imbalance, and structural exclusion.

Kuah et al. (2021) describe Malaysia's multiculturalism as one of "separation and preferentialism" (p. 290)—a framework that recognises ethnic plurality while reinforcing group-based hierarchies, where "finite resources are distributed in way that will favour the dominant Malay at the expense of the non-dominant ethnic communities" (Noor & Leong, 2013, p. 723). This emphasis on stability and national harmony may limit teacher education's emphasis on superficial sensitivity (i.e., TCS), with little progress toward equity-based reform. This approach falls short of the SEA-TCF's vision of culturally responsive and critically inclusive teaching.

Malaysia's local context of institutionalized ethnic stratification directly influences its framing of MC. Although diversity is recognised and formally integrated into education policy, the conceptual depth and pedagogical alignment with SEA-TCF principles remain limited. Consequently, MTE in Malaysia is caught in a paradox: promoting inclusion while perpetuating exclusion.

Singapore: Pragmatic progressivism

Singapore is often seen as the region's most advanced example for MTE. However, its approach is heavily influenced by a pragmatic, state-led mindset rooted in its unique demographic and political environment. With a population of 5.69 million, the country comprises ethnic Chinese (74.3%), Malays (13.4%)— acknowledged as the indigenous community—Indians (9%), and a sizable "Others" category (3.2%), which encompasses Eurasians and expatriates. Furthermore, migrant workers made up over 43% of the population by 2020, with 1.43 million migrants representing 38% of the total workforce, mainly from Malaysia, China, India, Bangladesh, and nearby Southeast Asian countries.

This complex social makeup has led Singapore to adopt a "multicultural pragmatism" model, where policies acknowledge diversity but are carefully tailored to support national unity, political stability, and economic competitiveness. The TEM21 incorporates cultural sensitivity

and, uniquely in the region, some elements of TS particularly through citizenship education, social cohesion modules, and mother-tongue instruction. These features position Singapore as the country most closely aligned with the SEA-TCF's aspirations for culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogy.

However, as Kuah et al. (2021) and Nagy (2013) argue, this progressiveness is moderated by strong top-down governance. The state's management of diversity is structured around four official racial categories (CMIO: Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others), with policies that promote racial harmony but leave little room for grassroots critique or the fluidity of intersecting identities. Khua et al. (2021) note that multiculturalism in Singapore is implemented within the framework of "integration and pragmatism (p. 290), where policies act as "a tool for economic growth and as a way to avoid social unrest" (p. 291).

Regarding MC, teacher education in Singapore meets many elements of the TMC level, with limited but notable movement toward TSC. However, TR—which involves critical engagement with systems of inequality—remains absent, reflecting a broader reluctance to politicize diversity in education. While Singapore's practices align most closely with SEA-TCF among ASEAN countries, this alignment remains pragmatic rather than transformative, prioritizing efficiency and manageability over equity and empowerment.

Indonesia: Instrumental diversity

Indonesia's framing of MC is deeply shaped by its remarkable cultural and linguistic diversity. However, its approach remains largely symbolic and government-focused, emphasizing national unity over structural change. With a population exceeding 272 million, Indonesia is home to 1,131 ethnic groups and over 700 languages, making it the most culturally plural nation in ASEAN. The dominant Javanese group (40.1%) is followed by Sundanese, Malay, Batak, and many others, with smaller indigenous and religious minority groups scattered throughout the archipelago. Unlike Malaysia or Thailand, Indonesia has relatively few international migrants, and thus its diversity challenges are internal and rooted in history.

ME in Indonesia is officially framed through Pancasila—the national ideology—and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika ("Unity in Diversity"), A motto dating back to the 14th century, revived post-independence to promote civic unity among Indonesia's diverse communities. But, this philosophical foundation has often been used in ways that serve state interests in cohesion, rather than justice.

As Hoon (2017) observes, Indonesia promotes instrumental multiculturalism—celebrating cultural difference to reinforce national identity while avoiding engagement with historical injustice, religious marginalization, or ethnolinguistic inequality. Sidi (2019) similarly characterizes this as an unequitable framework for multiculturalism, in which the Muslim majority is structurally privileged, and non-Muslim or indigenous groups are subordinated within the narrative of Indonesian-ness. Raihani (2018) adds that curricular rigidity and high-stakes examinations restrict the integration of multicultural themes in classroom practice, despite policy rhetoric advocating for tolerance and harmony.

Regarding the SEA-TCF, Indonesia's teacher education policy shows partial and symbolic alignment. While national rhetoric reflects SEA-TCF language on inclusion and responsiveness, actual teacher preparation mainly focuses on interpersonal harmony (i.e., TCS) rather than curricular inclusiveness or sociopolitical critique. There is scant evidence of competencies aligning with TMC or higher levels such as TSC and TR. In short, Indonesia's MTE is driven by a nation-building goal that prioritizes symbolic unity over structural reform. Although the SEA-TCF provides a useful reference, its vision remains unfulfilled in practice, hampered by policy inertia and ideological commitments to unity that turn MC into more of a rhetorical device than a pedagogical approach.

Vietnam: Colorblind ethics

Vietnam exemplifies ethnic diversity managed through moral universalism, with MC framed not by cultural recognition but by generalized values such as dignity, fairness, and tolerance. As of 2021, Vietnam had a population of 96.48 million, consisting of 54 officially recognised ethnic groups. The dominant Kinh majority (86) wields disproportionate economic, political, and educational power. In contrast, the remaining 14%—minority groups such as Tay, Hmong, Muong, Cham, and Khmer—are mainly concentrated in impoverished, rural, and mountainous areas. Despite this diversity, Vietnam's teacher standards are fragmented across multiple policy documents and do not explicitly reference cultural or linguistic differences. Instead, they promote an ethical framework rooted in neutral values that scholars describe as colorblind multiculturalism. Trieu (2018) found that over 90% of the disparities between Kinh and minority students originate from intergenerational inequality, which is worsened by Doi Moi-era reforms that introduced fee-based schooling, further widening educational access gaps for minorities.

Vietnam's education system is shaped by a legacy of postcolonial unification, wherein diversity was subsumed under the broader project of national identity. As Jingqing (2019) notes, Ho Chi Minh's anti-colonial vision emphasized the unity of all ethnic groups; however, this inclusive rhetoric has not translated into institutional policies or pedagogical practices that address minority exclusion. Instead, the focus remains on loyalty, discipline, and moral behaviour—traits considered central to nation-building but insufficient for fostering critical MC. Muenjanchoey et al. (2024) emphasize that teacher preparation programs seldom train educators to engage with ethnic diversity, nor do curricula encompass minority languages, histories, or perspectives. Consequently, teachers often lack both awareness and practical strategies for inclusive pedagogy. Vietnamese, the national language, predominates instruction, marginalizing the over 50 minority languages spoken in the country.

Vietnam's current understanding of MC weakly aligns with the inclusive vision of SEA-TCF's While the SEA-TCF stresses responsiveness to learner's backgrounds and culturally sensitive teaching, Vietnam's teacher education policies correspond only to the TCS level in Gorski's (2009) framework, which emphasis tolerance and moral development. There is a little movement toward TMC, and TSC or TR are absent due to the depoliticised framing of diversity.

In short, Vietnam's teacher education policies embody a centralized, ethics-driven model in where cultural and ethnic differences are recognised statistically but excluded from the

teaching practices and curricula. Though the SEA-TCF offers a more inclusive and learner-responsive framework, Vietnam's national approach remains grounded in colour-blind ethics, promoting homogenization rather than genuine inclusion.

Thailand: Surface-level celebration

Thailand's approach to MC in teacher education symbolically recognises diversity, shaped by a strong national ideology of Thai monolingualism and centralisation. As of 2020, Thailand's population consists of ethnic Thais (75%), Thai-Chinese (14%), Muslim Malays (3%), and other minority groups (8%). Indigenous communities, such as the sea gypsies in the South and highland ethnic minorities in the North and Northwest—including the Karen, Lahu, and Hmong—constitute about 7.2% of the population. Thailand also functions as a key regional hub for migrant labour, with over 3.6 million migrants in 2023, mainly from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia.

Despite this rich cultural and linguistic diversity, which includes over 60 language groups such as Central Thai, Lao Isan, Northern Thai, and Southern Thai, only Thai is designated as the official language, and education remains largely monolingual and centralized. The 2019 revision of the Teacher Professional Standards acknowledges diversity only superficially. However, teacher education continues to be limited to TCS, focusing on interpersonal harmony and moral behavior rather than structural analysis or justice. Arphattananon (2018) points out Thailand's ME as limited to food, costume, and festivals, without addressing deeper issues of power, language marginalization, or ethnic exclusion. Horstmann (2019) highlights that this surface-level celebration is often accompanied by surveillance and control, particularly in border provinces and the Muslim South, where state narratives of security and unity override multicultural inclusion. Hayami (2006) further underscores how the Thai state employs multicultural discourse to reinforce Buddhist, monolingual nationalism, thus discouraging linguistic rights and cultural recognition in schools.

Thailand has worked to extend educational access to migrant children, as evidenced by over 117,949 migrant students enrolled in basic education in 2023, most of whom are from Myanmar. However, teacher training programs offer minimal guidance or support for instructing linguistically and culturally diverse learners. Instructional materials remain highly centralized, with limited local adaptation. While the SEA-TCF promotes multicultural engagement, Thailand's teacher education weakly aligns with this vision. Although national rhetoric supports inclusion, implementation remains tied to a conservative and symbolic multiculturalism. There is no systematic effort to develop TMC or move toward TSC or TR. In practice, teachers' multicultural competence is limited to behavioral norms and cultural awareness, rather than critical pedagogical actions. In short, Thailand's approach to MTE is shaped by its centralized governance, Thainess nationalist discourse, and cautious engagement with migrant and minority rights. While it formally recognises diversity, its teacher education framework falls short of the SEA-TCF's goals aspirations, providing visibility without structural inclusion.

This thematic analysis demonstrates that while all five ASEAN countries nominally engage with MC, distinct local contexts—including demographic patterns, national ideologies, and

historical legacies—shape the depth, focus, and pedagogical direction of this engagement. Most teacher education standards align with the lower tiers of Gorski's (2009) model—TCS and TMC—with limited movement toward TSC or TR. These findings mirror earlier studies applying Gorski's framework in Western and East Asian contexts, which similarly identified a prevailing tendency toward liberal multiculturalism—emphasising tolerance, empathy, and inclusion—while avoiding deeper sociopolitical critique or activist orientations. This suggests that ASEAN frameworks, though regionally distinct, participate in a global pattern where MC is institutionally acknowledged but rarely transformed into critical or justice-oriented practice.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how MC is conceptualized and institutionalized within teacher education policy discourse across five ASEAN countries and the SEA-TCF. Guided by Gorski's (2009) framework of MTE and Van Dijk's (2015) CDA, the study explored how these frameworks define the multiculturally competent teacher and how policy language reflects ideologies of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Because most national standards pre-dated the 2018 SEA-TCF, the regional framework largely reproduces rather than transform existing national ideologies, serving as a harmonizing reference rather than a reformist instrument.

The findings reveal a consistent regional pattern: both the SEA-TCF and national standards emphasize the middle tiers of Gorski's model—TCS and TMC—stressing interpersonal harmony, moral conduct, and adaptive pedagogy. By contrast, the higher-order levels—TSC and TR—are absent. MC in ASEAN thus remains framed within a liberal paradigm, privileging inclusion and professionalism over systemic transformation.

This pattern aligns with Woo et al. (2024), who describe East Asian teacher policy as one of fragmented coherence, balancing global inclusion norms against national ideologies of uniformity. Similarly, Trisnawati et al. (2020) found that CRT across ASEAN often reduces culture to ethnicity, festivals, or moral virtues rather than engaging it as a power-laden construct. Even as diversity is reframed from deficit to asset, long-standing nation building narratives sustain institutional inertia. These dynamics illustrate Van Dijk's (2015) contention that policy discourse legitimates inequality through neutral, depoliticized language—acknowledging diversity while obscuring exclusionary structures. In a broader sense, this depoliticization mirrors what Chang and Viesca (2022) describe in their critical review of research on CRP. They argue that much teacher education work worldwide remains descriptive and instrumental, emphasising awareness and technique while avoiding engagement with race, power, and systemic injustice. Their notion of research as racialized social practice highlights how both teaching and research often reproduce inequity under the guise of neutrality. Incorporating their insight clarifies that ASEAN's liberal framing of MC is not merely a policy preference but part of a global pattern in which personal ethics are prioritized over critical reflexivity and collective transformation.

Comparatively, this liberal framing reflects similar trends in other regions. In Europe, inclusion remains marginal, often viewed as an optional specialization (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022). Beaton et al. (2021) observe that teacher education programmes frequently isolate diversity into a separate modules, leaving educators ill-prepared

for complexity. In Australia, Ji et al. (2025) find that pre-service teachers feel underprepared because training focuses more on ethics rather than power analysis. Within ASEAN, Trisnawati et al. (2020) confirm that CRT mainly aims to reduce classroom power distance—illustrating TCS/TMC—but rarely advances to structural critique (i.e., TSC/TR). Similar limitations is evident in U.S. research, where CRP remains race-neutral and reinforces systemic whiteness (Chang & Viesca, 2022).

Taken together, these studies clarify why ASEAN teacher education policy discourse tends to focus on practical TCS/TMC approaches compatible with centralised governance and accountability cultures, while TSC/TR demands autonomy and community partnership not yet systemically supported. Incorporating critical reflexivity—as suggested by Chang and Viesca (2022)—could help bridge this divide, encouraging educators to examine how their positionality and institutional surroundings perpetuate inequality and to build the analytical skills needed for sociopolitical engagement. Dhirathiti and Sonsri (2019) shows that ASEAN's educational cooperation, despite rhetorically uniting under the idea of ASEAN One, remains structurally fragmented. They also identify four distinct clusters of higher education governance —top-down, former socialist, liberal, and advanced Westernized systems—reflecting the region's diverse political and economic pathways. Unlike the European Bologna Process, ASEAN does not have a formal harmonization process, relying instead on voluntary collaboration and country-specific initiatives. This uneven framework helps explain why frameworks like the SEA-TCF mainly serve as coordinating tools rather than agents of transformation: they seek comparability and stability across differing systems rather than enforcing structural convergence.

Country specific imaginaries further influence this orientation: Malaysia and Indonesia embed incorporate diversity into their nation-building narratives; Singapore interprets it through pragmatic management; Vietnam and Thailand depoliticize it via moral universalism. Across these cases, teacher education views diversity as a condition to be managed, not as a space for justice—illustrating Nagy's (2013) concept of multiculturalism as control. This instrumental perspective aligns Patras et al. (2022), whose comparative study of ME implementation in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand revealed that multiculturalism is often justified as a tool for national sustainability and social cohesion, with less focus on equity or structural change. Although these countries include multiculturalism in their policies, curriculum, and culture, the practice primarily aims to uphold universal values rather than encourage critical engagement with structural inequalities.

Moving beyond this liberal frame both policy reform and institutional redesign. As Gorski (2009) asserts, MTE must be a political project of social justice, not a neutral training exercise. Frameworks like the SEA-TCF should therefore integrate principles of critical ME—explicitly naming power, privilege, and systemic oppression, and positioning teachers as change agents rather than mere facilitators of harmony. Legislative precedents such as Washington State's Cultural Competency, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (CCDEI) Standards (n.d.) demonstrate how systematic, participatory policy revision—through advisory workgroups, public consultation, and professional development—can embed equity and antibias education as professional norms. While ASEAN's political structures differ, similar iterative revision processes could guide SEAMEO and national teacher councils toward frameworks that are responsive to context and rooted in equity.

The lack of TSC/TR levels has clear consequences. Without a critical perspective, teacher education does not prepare educators to identify or challenge structural inequities, thus perpetuating the very disparities that ME claims to address (Gorski, 2009). Still, reform must strike a balance between idealism and practicality. The SEA-TCF's periodic review provides a valid platform for integrating critical, justice-focused competencies. Achieving this would require collective action among Ministries of Education, with support from SEAMEO INNOTECH, UNESCO, and regional academic coalitions like the Council of Deans of Education of Thailand. Developing cross-institutional partnerships and community-based practicum models could institutionalize MC beyond ethics, embedding it into pedagogy, assessment, and teacher agency. These approaches would also foster the ongoing critical reflexivity that Chang and Viesca (2022) highlight as vital to transforming MC from interpersonal sensitivity into a systemic understanding.

Ultimately, the promise of transformative MC in ASEAN depends on shifting from celebrating difference to questioning inequality. While centralized bureaucracies and national ideologies limit open dialogue on power, small steps can be taken through regional peer learning, reflective professional growth, and collaborative curriculum redesign. By combining harmonization with critical reflexivity, ASEAN can evolve toward a model of teacher professionalism that not only recognises diversity but also empower educators to challenge the structural inequities shaping classrooms and societies.

LIMITATIONS

The research has two primary limitations. First, the study relies solely on publicly available policy reports, which do not always capture the nuanced practices, local variations, or informal initiatives in teacher education across ASEAN countries. Second, although the research uses analytical methods, the qualitative interpretivist research approach remains vulnerable to researcher bias in coding and thematic interpretation. These limitations should be considered when assessing the scope and transferability of the findings, as well as their implications for developing MC in teacher preparation within the region.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how MC is conceptualized and institutionalized in teacher education policies across ASEAN and within the SEA-TCF. The findings reveal that while ASEAN countries have integrated MC into their teacher standards, these efforts largely operate within the liberal domains of TCS and TMC. The more critical and transformative levels—TSC and TR—remain absent. Consequently, diversity in policy is framed as an ethics and interpersonal matter rather than as a structural issue requiring justice-oriented reform.

The SEA-TCF exemplifies the region's attempt to harmonize teacher standards through collaboration and shared goals. Yet, it mirrors rather than transforms national ideologies rooted in nationalism, social cohesion, and state-centred governance. As this study shows, the

local sociopolitical environment shapes how MC is interpreted and enacted. Moving beyond an overly optimistic and depoliticized view of diversity requires teacher education to engage with power, privilege, and systemic inequality—treating MC not as a neutral skill set but as a critical capacity for social transformation.

To advance this vision, ASEAN policymakers should strengthen alignment between regional initiatives such as the SEA-TCF and global frameworks like UNESCO's guidance and SDG 4, embedding MC as a foundation of quality education rather than as an add-on. Institutional mechanisms such as regular SEA-TCF review cycles, collaborative policy platforms (e.g., SEAMEO INNOTECH), and professional associations (e.g., the Council of Deans of Education of Thailand) can support ongoing reform towards more critical, equity- focused teacher education. By redefining MC as both a pedagogical and political commitment, ASEAN can shift from mere harmonization toward transformation— equipping educators not only to manage diversity but also to challenge the inequalities that influence it.

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