

Education and National Identity Formation in Southeast Asia: Institutional Structures and Lived Experiences

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Abstract

Education functions as a central institutional mechanism in shaping national identity within Southeast Asia, a region characterised by deep ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Within this context, formal education systems structure identity formation through curriculum, language policy, and pedagogical practices that align learners with state-defined narratives of nationhood. However, identity formation does not occur uniformly, as everyday experiences, classroom interactions, and socio-cultural contexts mediate how these narratives are interpreted and internalised. Alternative and non-formal education settings further contribute to diverse identity trajectories, particularly among marginalised groups such as migrant and stateless populations. The interaction between institutional frameworks and lived experiences produces identity outcomes that are fluid, negotiated, and context dependent. At the same time, processes of globalisation, regional integration, and cultural hybridity introduce additional layers of complexity, reshaping how individuals construct belonging across national and transnational spaces. Existing literature remains largely focused on formal systems and often conceptualises identity as a stable outcome, thereby overlooking experiential and alternative dimensions. This study argues for a more integrative analytical approach that captures the dynamic interplay between structure and experience. Such an approach is essential for advancing theoretical understanding and informing educational policy in increasingly diverse and globalised Southeast Asian societies today.

Keywords: National Identity, Education Systems, Identity Formation, Sociocultural Diversity

Introduction

Education is conceptualised as a central institutional mechanism in shaping national identity within plural societies, particularly in Southeast Asia where ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity constitute a defining structural condition. This diversity necessitates deliberate

educational strategies to foster cohesion and shared understanding, especially through language and curriculum arrangements that mediate difference (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017; Chakrabhand, 2025). In this regard, education extends beyond knowledge transmission to function as a structured arena for embedding collective values and normative orientations. The organisation of civic content and cultural narratives reflects attempts to align diverse populations with shared meanings of nationhood. Consequently, education operates as a primary institutional site where national identity is systematically constructed.

Contemporary Southeast Asian societies are increasingly shaped by migration, transnational mobility, ethnic diversity, and global cultural influences, creating significant challenges for national cohesion and collective belonging. Within this context, education becomes increasingly important as a strategic institutional mechanism for fostering shared national values and strengthening social integration among diverse populations (King, 2016; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017). The significance of this issue is particularly evident among marginalised groups such as migrant and stateless children, whose exclusion from formal education systems may contribute to fragmented identity formation and limited social integration. Consequently, understanding how educational structures and learning experiences shape national identity is essential for maintaining social stability and strengthening inclusive nation-building processes in Southeast Asia.

This study is beneficial for policymakers, educators, and researchers because it provides a broader understanding of how institutional structures and lived educational experiences contribute to identity formation across diverse educational contexts. The study also contributes to existing scholarship by addressing the limited attention given to alternative and non-formal educational settings in discussions of national identity formation. Existing studies remain largely focused on formal schooling systems, thereby overlooking how lived educational experiences and marginalised learning contexts shape diverse identity trajectories. In practical terms, the study may assist policymakers and educational institutions in developing more inclusive educational policies, culturally responsive pedagogical approaches, and socially integrative learning environments that are better suited to the socio-cultural realities of contemporary Southeast Asian societies.

In the Malaysian context, the integrative role of education becomes evident through its capacity to manage ethnic diversity while promoting social cohesion. Empirical discussions indicate that schooling contributes to the cultivation of unity by embedding shared values within a multi-ethnic framework (Adam et al., 2021). At the same time, regional variations in curriculum design demonstrate how different countries incorporate multicultural principles within subjects such as history, language, and civic education (Chakrabhand, 2025). Rather than reflecting a uniform model, these approaches reveal context-specific adaptations shaped by socio-political priorities. As such, the formation of national identity through education remains structured but inherently contingent on local conditions.

From a broader analytical perspective, identity formation within educational settings cannot be assumed to follow a linear trajectory. Regional scholarship emphasises that identity is constructed through processes that are often contested, fragmented, and historically situated (Ghosh, 2022). Within this landscape, educational institutions interact with wider socio-political dynamics that influence how individuals interpret belonging. In areas marked

by socio-political tensions, such as Aceh and Pattani, educational institutions simultaneously function as sites of socialisation and arenas of ideological negotiation (Satibi et al., 2022). This indicates that identity formation is mediated by both institutional intent and lived socio-historical experiences.

Historically, the expansion of education systems in Southeast Asia has been closely aligned with post-independence nation-building agendas. Policy-oriented analyses suggest that education is structured to address issues of access, equity, and national integration within diverse societies (Lee, 2016). In parallel, regional discourses have increasingly framed education as a mechanism for constructing broader collective identities, particularly within the ASEAN context (Koh, 2007). This dual orientation illustrates the need to balance national cohesion with regional and global engagement. As a result, identity emerges as a layered construct shaped through overlapping institutional and transnational influences.

Attention to structural inequalities further complicates the relationship between education and identity formation. Studies indicate that migrant and stateless populations encounter significant barriers to educational access, which in turn affect their opportunities for social integration and identity development (Wang, 2020; Arpanudin & Dewantara, 2025). These constraints position certain groups at the margins of institutional identity formation processes. At the level of everyday experience, school environments play a critical role in shaping identity through interactions that may reinforce inclusion or exclusion (Kwong, 2011). This dynamic underscores how education can reproduce differentiated identity trajectories across social groups.

Consideration of institutional diversity reveals further variation in how identity is shaped across educational contexts. Formal education systems typically prioritise standardisation through curriculum and language policies, which contribute to national cohesion but may also marginalise minority identities (Miao, 2024). By contrast, alternative educational settings provide more flexible environments where identity is negotiated through lived experiences and social interaction. Conceptual analyses emphasise that identity is not fixed but continuously shaped through engagement with cultural, political, and educational influences (Mohamed et al., 2025). This suggests that a comprehensive understanding of identity formation requires integrating both institutional structures and experiential dimensions.

Literature Review

At the conceptual level, national identity is understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions shaped through continuous interaction between individuals and their social environments. This perspective emphasises that identity is not a fixed attribute but an evolving process influenced by historical trajectories, cultural formations, and institutional arrangements (Nachayeva, 2025). In the Southeast Asian context, such dynamism is particularly evident due to layered histories of colonisation, migration, and state formation. Accordingly, identity formation must be approached as an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a stable outcome. This conceptualisation foregrounds the importance of examining both structural and experiential dimensions in understanding identity.

From an analytical standpoint, identity formation can be framed through the interaction of historical influences, institutional mechanisms, pedagogical practices, and informal dimensions that collectively shape identity as a dynamic process. Historical conditions such as colonisation and migration establish foundational orientations, while institutional structures regulate identity through curriculum and policy frameworks (Qazi et al., 2022; Poudel et al., 2022; Moser et al., 2024). At the level of practice, pedagogical approaches mediate how these frameworks are translated into learning experiences (Ubaque-Casallas, 2021). Meanwhile, everyday interactions within classrooms, including teacher attitudes and student experiences, shape how identity is interpreted and internalised (Fatima, 2023). Taken together, these dimensions highlight that identity formation emerges from the interplay between institutional regulation and lived experience.

Within the institutional perspective, education systems are consistently positioned as structured sites for the formation of national identity through formal mechanisms of socialisation. School environments align learners with national narratives via curriculum content, language practices, and institutional routines that reinforce shared meanings of nationhood (Mukherjee & Singh, 2021; Shabrov et al., 2021). Such processes facilitate the internalisation of collective values through repeated exposure to symbolic practices embedded within schooling environments. Nevertheless, this institutional orientation frequently assumes uniformity in identity formation despite variations in learner experiences across different socio-cultural contexts. Consequently, institutional influence must be interpreted alongside issues of access, participation, and social positioning.

Curriculum functions as a central mechanism in shaping identity by determining which historical narratives, cultural symbols, and knowledge systems are legitimised within formal education. National curricula frequently prioritise dominant narratives that reinforce collective belonging and shared identity (Ahonen, 2021). However, this selectivity may marginalise alternative perspectives, particularly those associated with minority and underrepresented groups (Alexander & Weekes-Bernard, 2017; Arday et al., 2021). This dual function positions curriculum simultaneously as an integrative and exclusionary mechanism within identity construction processes. Therefore, curriculum must be understood not merely as instructional content but as an ideological instrument that regulates legitimate forms of national identity.

Language policy constitutes another important dimension in identity construction because language operates both as a medium of instruction and as a symbolic marker of belonging. Regional analyses indicate that Southeast Asian countries adopt varying approaches in balancing national, local, and international languages within educational systems (Kosonen, 2017; Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017). The promotion of national languages often functions to strengthen cohesion, whereas the incorporation of English reflects broader global and economic orientations (Clayton, 2006). In several contexts, bilingual and multilingual educational models attempt to reconcile these competing priorities (Abduh & Rosmaladewi, 2019; Lee et al., 2021). These variations demonstrate that language policy is deeply embedded within the politics of identity formation rather than functioning solely as an educational tool.

Beyond structural dimensions, pedagogical practices play a significant role in mediating how identity-related knowledge is experienced by learners. Teacher-centred approaches tend to prioritise transmission of official knowledge, whereas participatory pedagogies encourage learners to critically engage with identity-related meanings and experiences. Existing scholarship suggests that pedagogy influences identity development because it shapes how learners interpret, negotiate, and internalise educational messages within classroom settings (Ubaque-Casallas, 2021). In this regard, identity formation depends not only on curricular content but also on the organisation of learning processes and social interaction. This highlights pedagogy as an active and influential dimension within identity construction.

Instructional materials similarly function as carriers of national narratives through selective representation of history, culture, and collective memory. Textbooks and educational resources often reinforce official perspectives while marginalising alternative viewpoints and minority experiences (Nachayeva, 2025). Within Southeast Asian educational systems, such representations frequently prioritise unity and cohesion as dominant national ideals. These selective representations contribute to the standardisation of collective memory and influence how learners imagine national belonging. Hence, instructional materials remain significant instruments in shaping the symbolic dimensions of identity formation.

At the level of everyday schooling, informal dimensions such as classroom climate, teacher-student relationships, and institutional culture substantially influence learners' sense of belonging and identity development. These relational and experiential dimensions shape identity beyond formal curriculum structures and policy frameworks (Aldridge et al., 2016; Chiu et al., 2016). In diverse educational settings, everyday interactions mediate how learners experience inclusion, exclusion, and recognition within institutional environments. This demonstrates that identity formation is co-produced through continuous interaction between formal structures and lived educational experiences. Accordingly, analyses of identity formation must incorporate both explicit and implicit dimensions of schooling.

Despite extensive scholarship on education and national identity formation, existing studies remain predominantly centred on formal schooling systems and state-regulated educational institutions. Limited attention has been given to alternative and non-formal educational settings, particularly those involving migrant, refugee, and stateless populations in Southeast Asia. As a result, current literature inadequately explains how identity is negotiated through lived educational experiences within marginalised learning environments (Loganathan et al., 2021; Yeo et al., 2020). This limitation restricts broader understanding of how institutional structures and everyday social interactions collectively shape diverse identity trajectories. Therefore, a more integrative analytical perspective is required to capture the complexity and fluidity of identity formation across varied educational contexts.

Discussion

Discussions on national identity formation in Southeast Asia indicate that this process is significantly shaped by the interaction between educational institutional structures and broader socio-cultural contexts. Within this setting, formal education operates as a mechanism that organises identity through curriculum, language policy, and state-directed frameworks aimed at standardising national orientation. Nevertheless, the plural nature of Southeast Asian societies and the region's complex historical interactions complicate

assumptions of uniform identity outcomes (King, 2016; Nuraeni, 2017). Institutional structures therefore function primarily as foundational frameworks, while identity outcomes remain mediated by diverse social and cultural experiences. Consequently, identity formation must be understood as a contextual, negotiated, and multi-layered process.

From an experiential perspective, everyday interactions within educational environments play a substantial role in shaping how identity is interpreted and internalised by learners. Relationships among students, teachers, and institutional environments generate social experiences that directly influence identity development (Verhoeven et al., 2018; Flum & Kaplan, 2012). These relational dynamics introduce variations that cannot be fully explained through structural mechanisms alone. In this regard, identity emerges through continuous interaction between institutional arrangements and lived educational experiences. Such findings reinforce the importance of integrating both structural and experiential dimensions in analyses of identity formation.

The influence of globalisation further complicates identity formation processes by introducing cultural interaction, adaptation, and hybridity within Southeast Asian societies. Regional scholarship demonstrates that global forces simultaneously encourage cultural convergence while producing hybrid forms of identity that combine local and global orientations (Abbasovna, 2024; Ullah & Ho, 2020). These transformations reshape how individuals negotiate belonging within increasingly fluid socio-cultural environments. Rather than entirely displacing local identities, globalisation frequently generates layered identities characterised by multiple affiliations and transnational influences. This condition reinforces the argument that identity formation remains dynamic and continuously evolving.

At the regional level, identity formation is also influenced by transnational processes associated with ASEAN integration and broader regional cooperation. Existing studies indicate that collective Southeast Asian identity remains unevenly experienced and is often more prominent among political and institutional elites than within broader populations (Rattanaseevee, 2023). Simultaneously, alternative forms of identity continue to emerge through generational experiences, migration, transnational networks, and shared historical memories (Grabowsky & Cornelio, 2019). These developments demonstrate that identity formation increasingly extends beyond singular national boundaries and reflects overlapping national, regional, and global influences. Accordingly, identity construction in Southeast Asia must be interpreted within a broader transnational framework.

Within this evolving landscape, educational institutions continue to function as important mediating spaces between national objectives and diverse identity experiences. Curriculum implementation, language practices, and pedagogical engagement influence how learners construct and negotiate identity within specific educational contexts (Wortham, 2003; Xiao et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of these institutional mechanisms depends significantly on how educational experiences are interpreted and experienced by learners themselves. This interaction between institutional intent and everyday classroom realities determines the extent to which identity is internalised, negotiated, or contested. These conditions suggest that educational institutions must adopt more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches that recognise socio-cultural diversity and varied learner experiences within Southeast Asian societies.

The discussion further indicates that alternative and non-formal educational settings provide important insights into the complexity of identity formation, particularly among migrant and stateless populations. In such contexts, identity is often shaped through flexible social interactions, informal learning practices, and lived experiences rather than through standardised institutional structures alone (Gouvias et al., 2025; Rojas et al., 2025; Sadat et al., 2025). These environments produce identity trajectories that are more fluid, situational, and context dependent compared to those commonly associated with formal schooling systems. This highlights the limitations of approaches that interpret identity formation solely through formal educational frameworks. Therefore, broader analytical perspectives are necessary to explain the diversity of identity experiences across varied educational environments.

Overall, national identity formation in Southeast Asia can be understood as an ongoing and dynamic process shaped by institutional structures, lived experiences, and broader socio-political transformations. Migration, cultural interaction, regional integration, and globalisation contribute to the emergence of fluid and overlapping identity forms that challenge singular and fixed national narratives (Wang, 2020; Grabowsky & Cornelio, 2019). These developments require analytical approaches that are flexible, multidimensional, and sensitive to contextual variation. Future research should therefore prioritise process-oriented analyses that capture the evolving and negotiated nature of identity formation within increasingly diverse Southeast Asian societies.

Conclusion

The review demonstrates that educational institutions in Southeast Asia occupy a central yet differentiated position in shaping national identity through both formal and informal processes. Formal mechanisms such as curriculum design, language policy, and pedagogical practices structure identity formation within state-defined frameworks, while everyday experiences and alternative learning environments generate more varied identity outcomes. This duality reflects the broader socio-cultural diversity of the region, where multiple historical trajectories, cultural traditions, and social realities intersect (Chakrabhand, 2025; Abbasovna, 2024). In this context, national identity formation cannot be reduced to a singular institutional pathway but must instead be understood as a complex and context-dependent process shaped by diverse structural and experiential influences.

The analysis further indicates that existing scholarship remains predominantly focused on formal schooling systems and frequently conceptualises identity as a relatively stable outcome. Such an orientation limits understanding of the dynamic and negotiated nature of identity formation, particularly within marginalised and transitional educational contexts (Mohamed et al., 2025; Ghosh, 2022). Limited attention towards alternative and non-formal educational settings also constrains broader explanations of how migrant, refugee, and stateless learners negotiate belonging through lived educational experiences. Consequently, this study contributes to the literature by emphasising the importance of integrating institutional structures with experiential dimensions in understanding diverse identity trajectories across Southeast Asia.

From a broader perspective, the findings suggest that educational policies and pedagogical approaches must become increasingly inclusive and context-sensitive in responding to socio-

cultural diversity and changing patterns of belonging within contemporary Southeast Asian societies. The interaction between curriculum, pedagogy, language practices, and everyday educational experiences demonstrates that identity formation is shaped through continuous negotiation rather than institutional transmission alone. At the same time, processes of migration, globalisation, and regional integration continue to produce fluid and overlapping identity formations that challenge singular national narratives (Rattanaseevee, 2023; Abbasovna, 2024). Accordingly, strengthening educational inclusivity and recognising diverse identity experiences remain essential for sustaining social cohesion and inclusive nation-building in Southeast Asia.

Future research should therefore move beyond static conceptualisations of national identity and prioritise process-oriented analyses that examine how institutional structures, lived experiences, and transnational influences interact across diverse educational settings. Such an approach is necessary for advancing both theoretical understanding and policy development related to education and identity formation within increasingly plural and interconnected societies.

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