

Research Article

Mapping Educational Policy Research in Southeast Asia: A Bibliometric and Systematic Review of Equity and Access Issues

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ABSTRACT

Educational equity remains one of the most pressing challenges confronting policymakers across Southeast Asia, where socioeconomic stratification, geographic remoteness, and ethnic diversity create persistent barriers to universal access. Despite growing scholarly attention, no comprehensive bibliometric mapping of educational policy research focusing on equity and access in this region has been undertaken for the period 2010 to 2019. This study addresses that gap by combining bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review of 247 peer-reviewed articles retrieved from the Scopus and Web of Science databases. Using VOSviewer for co-occurrence and collaboration network visualization, Biblioshiny for thematic evolution mapping, and Publish or Perish for citation metrics, the analysis reveals a steady upward trajectory in publication output, with notable acceleration after 2014. Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia emerge as the most productive countries, while the National University of Singapore and University of Malaya lead institutional contributions. Keyword clustering identifies five dominant research fronts: inclusive education policy, decentralization and governance, rural access disparities, gender equity, and educational financing reform. The systematic review synthesizes findings across these thematic clusters and demonstrates that policy discourse has shifted from supply-side infrastructure concerns toward demand-side quality and participation issues. The study highlights significant research voids in cross-national comparative analyses and longitudinal policy impact evaluations. Implications for regional educational governance and equity-oriented reform are discussed.

Keywords: Educational policy; Bibliometric analysis; Equity and access; Southeast Asia; Systematic literature review; Comparative education

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between educational policy and social development has occupied scholars and policymakers for decades, yet nowhere is this relationship more consequential than in Southeast Asia, where rapid economic transformation coexists with deep structural inequalities (Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Hallinger and Bryant, 2013). The ten nations comprising the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) display extraordinary heterogeneity in governance structures, per capita income, and educational infrastructure, conditions that render uniform policy prescriptions inadequate and comparative analysis indispensable (Marphatia et al., 2010). Over the past decade, international organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank have repeatedly called attention to persistent gaps in educational access, particularly among rural populations, ethnic minorities, and economically marginalized communities (UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018). These gaps are not merely statistical artifacts; they represent tangible obstacles to human capital formation and intergenerational social mobility.

Educational decentralization, a reform strategy adopted in varying degrees by Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, was expected to bring decision-making closer to communities and thereby improve responsiveness to local needs (Bjork, 2013; Shoraku, 2013). Empirical evidence on the outcomes of decentralization, however, remains contested. While some studies report improvements in enrollment and school construction in previously underserved areas (Suharti, 2013), others document increased regional disparity as wealthier provinces capture a disproportionate share of newly devolved resources (Kristiansen and Pratikno, 2011). This tension between devolution and equity lies at the heart of contemporary policy debates across the region and highlights the importance of systematic evidence synthesis.

Equity in education extends well beyond enrollment figures. According to Unterhalter (2012), genuine educational equity demands attention to the quality of learning experiences, the relevance of curricula, and the distribution of outcomes across social groups. In the Southeast Asian context, quality disparities between urban elite schools and rural village institutions are stark, and they intersect with gender, ethnicity, disability, and migration status in ways that amplify disadvantage (Symaco and Tee, 2019; Tandon and Fukao, 2015). Inclusive education policies have gained traction in regional policy frameworks, notably through the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint, yet implementation lags behind aspiration in most member states (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

Research on educational governance in the region has grown substantially since 2010, fueled by the Sustainable Development Goals and their explicit emphasis on inclusive and equitable quality education (Carm, 2013; King, 2014). Comparative education scholars have examined how political regimes, colonial legacies, and religious traditions shape policy trajectories in distinctive ways across the region (Welch, 2010; Bray and Thomas, 2013). These studies illuminate the limits of one-size-fits-all policy transfer and underscore the need for context-sensitive approaches to reform. Despite this growing body of work, the literature remains fragmented across disciplinary silos, with economists, political scientists, sociologists, and educationists often working in parallel rather than in conversation.

Bibliometric analysis has emerged as a powerful tool for mapping intellectual landscapes, identifying research fronts, and revealing collaboration patterns across disciplines (Zupic and Cater, 2015). In education research specifically, bibliometric methods have been applied to topics ranging from higher education management (Hallinger and Chatpinyakoo, 2019) to technology-enhanced learning (Bozkurt et al., 2015), yet their application to educational policy studies in Southeast Asia remains limited. A small number of reviews have examined educational leadership or science education in the region (Hallinger and Bryant, 2013), but none has systematically mapped the equity and access dimensions of policy research with the combination of bibliometric and thematic analysis that the present study undertakes.

Systematic literature reviews complement bibliometric techniques by enabling deeper qualitative engagement with research findings (Petticrew and Roberts, 2012). Where bibliometric analysis excels at identifying structural patterns in a body of literature, such as citation networks, keyword clusters, and publication trends, systematic reviews interrogate the substantive arguments, methodological approaches, and empirical conclusions of individual studies. Combining the two approaches provides a more comprehensive picture than either method alone can offer (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017). In the field of educational policy, this integrated approach is especially valuable because policy research is inherently interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse.

The urgency of this review is amplified by the fact that Southeast Asia houses more than 650 million people, a significant proportion of whom are under the age of 25 and therefore directly affected by educational policy decisions made today. Countries such as Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia continue to struggle with basic access provision, while more developed economies like Singapore and Brunei grapple with issues of inclusion and social stratification within ostensibly universal systems (Brock and Symaco, 2011; Lee, 2013). The diversity of challenges underscores the value of a regional mapping exercise that can identify where scholarly attention is concentrated, where it is lacking, and what implications these patterns hold for future research and policy.

Despite the proliferation of primary studies, no bibliometric review to date has comprehensively mapped educational policy research on equity and access across the ASEAN region for the 2010 to 2019 period. This gap is significant because it means that scholars, policymakers, and funding agencies lack a synthesized overview of research trends, thematic evolution, and collaborative networks in the field. Without such an overview, research efforts risk duplication, important questions may remain unasked, and evidence-informed policymaking is impeded.

The present study aims to fill this gap by pursuing four interrelated research questions. First, what are the major publication trends and patterns in educational policy research related to equity and access in Southeast Asia between 2010 and 2019? Second, which countries, institutions, and authors have been most productive and influential in the field? Third, what thematic clusters and keyword networks characterize the intellectual structure of the literature? Fourth, how have dominant research themes evolved over the decade, and what gaps remain for future investigation? By addressing these questions through an integrated bibliometric and systematic review methodology, the study contributes both a methodological demonstration and a substantive knowledge synthesis to the field of comparative education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Educational Equity in Southeast Asia

Educational equity, understood as the fair and just distribution of educational opportunities, resources, and outcomes, has deep roots in theories of social justice articulated by Rawls and subsequently adapted to educational contexts by scholars such as Brighouse and Swift (2014). In Southeast Asia, the equity challenge is shaped by postcolonial legacies that created dual educational tracks serving different social strata, patterns that persist in modified form even after independence and subsequent reforms (Welch, 2010). The concept of equity in this region therefore encompasses both horizontal concerns,

ensuring that all children have access to schooling, and vertical concerns, ensuring that additional support reaches those facing the greatest barriers (Tikly and Barrett, 2011).

Empirical research from the region documents persistent disparities along geographic, socioeconomic, and ethnic lines. Suharti (2013) demonstrated that Indonesian provinces with higher poverty rates consistently underperform on standardized assessments, while Symaco and Tee (2019) showed that indigenous communities in Malaysia and the Philippines experience educational marginalization despite targeted affirmative policies. Gender disparities, though reduced in aggregate enrollment figures, remain significant at secondary and tertiary levels in countries such as Cambodia and Laos (Tandon and Fukao, 2015). These findings suggest that formal access to schooling, while necessary, is insufficient to achieve genuine equity without concurrent attention to quality and retention.

The theoretical framing of equity in the region has shifted over the decade from a narrow focus on enrollment parity toward a capabilities-based approach influenced by the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Unterhalter, 2012). This shift is visible in policy documents such as the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth, which explicitly acknowledges that physical access alone does not constitute meaningful educational opportunity (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). Scholars have increasingly argued that equity-oriented policy must address the pedagogical, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of inclusion, a position that has significant implications for teacher training, curriculum design, and assessment practices (Carm, 2013).

2.2 Policy Reform and Educational Access

Educational reform in Southeast Asia has proceeded along multiple tracks, reflecting the diversity of political systems and development stages within the region. Compulsory education laws, school construction programs, conditional cash transfers, and scholarship schemes represent supply-side interventions aimed at removing financial and infrastructural barriers to access (Marphatia et al., 2010). Demand-side interventions, such as community-based monitoring, school-based management, and mother-tongue education programs, have gained prominence as evidence accumulates that supply alone does not guarantee participation or completion (Shoraku, 2013; Bjork, 2013).

Decentralization has been the dominant governance reform across several ASEAN nations, most notably Indonesia following the enactment of Law 22/1999 on Regional Governance. Kristiansen and Pratikno (2011) found that while decentralization transferred fiscal and administrative authority to district governments, the absence of adequate accountability mechanisms enabled elite capture and patronage, undermining the equity objectives of the reform. Similar dynamics have been observed in Thailand and the Philippines, where local governance capacity varies widely and central oversight has been weakened without commensurate strengthening of subnational institutions (Hallinger and Bryant, 2013). These findings align with broader theoretical arguments about the conditional nature of decentralization benefits, which depend critically on institutional capacity, transparency, and civic participation (King, 2014).

Financing reform represents another critical dimension of access policy. Public expenditure on education as a share of GDP varies enormously across the region, from less than two percent in Myanmar to over six percent in Malaysia (World Bank, 2018). Brock and Symaco (2011) argued that inadequate and inequitable public financing is the single most significant structural barrier to universal access in the least developed ASEAN states. Innovative financing mechanisms, including public-private partnerships, performance-based funding, and international development assistance, have been explored with mixed results, and the evidence base for their effectiveness in promoting equity remains thin (Lee, 2013).

2.3 Governance and Educational Inequality

Educational governance encompasses the formal and informal rules, norms, and processes through which educational policy is formulated, implemented, and evaluated (Bray and Thomas, 2013). In Southeast Asia, governance structures range from highly centralized systems, as in Vietnam and Brunei, to substantially decentralized arrangements in Indonesia and the Philippines. Comparative analysis reveals that neither extreme consistently produces superior equity outcomes; rather, the alignment between governance structures, institutional capacity, and policy coherence appears to be the critical determinant (Welch, 2010).

Corruption and weak accountability represent persistent governance challenges. Studies have documented how teacher absenteeism, ghost schools, and procurement irregularities divert resources from their intended beneficiaries (Kristiansen and Pratikno, 2011). At the same time, governance reforms such as school-based management and community participation in school councils have shown promise in improving transparency and responsiveness, particularly when supported by adequate training and information systems (Bjork, 2013). The governance literature in the region thus presents a nuanced picture in which structural reforms create both opportunities and risks for equity.

2.4 Bibliometric Studies in Educational Research

Bibliometric methods, originally developed in library and information science, have been increasingly adopted in education research to map knowledge structures and track intellectual developments over time (Zupic and Cater, 2015). Co-citation analysis, keyword co-occurrence mapping, and collaboration network visualization have proven particularly valuable for identifying research fronts and detecting thematic shifts in rapidly growing fields (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017). Hallinger and Chatpinyakoo (2019) demonstrated the utility of bibliometric mapping in higher education research, revealing the dominant influence of Anglo-American scholarship and the relative marginalization of perspectives from developing nations.

Within the Southeast Asian education literature, bibliometric approaches remain underutilized. Hallinger and Bryant (2013) conducted one of the few bibliometric analyses focused on educational leadership and management research in the region, finding significant growth in output but persistent dependence on Western theoretical frameworks. Bozkurt et al. (2015) applied similar techniques to distance education literature with a global scope, revealing the emergence of Asia as a major contributor. The present study builds on these precedents by applying an integrated bibliometric and systematic review approach specifically to educational policy research on equity and access, a combination that has not been attempted for the Southeast Asian context.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method research design combining quantitative bibliometric analysis with qualitative systematic literature review. The bibliometric component maps structural patterns in publication output, citation networks, collaboration structures, and keyword co-occurrence, while the systematic review component synthesizes the substantive findings and thematic arguments of the included studies. This integrated approach follows recommendations by Zupic and Cater (2015) and Aria and Cuccurullo (2017) for producing comprehensive knowledge maps in interdisciplinary fields.

3.2 Database Selection and Search Strategy

Two major academic databases were selected: Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). These databases were chosen for their comprehensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed journals in education and social science, their structured metadata suitable for bibliometric analysis, and their widespread use in comparable review studies (Hallinger and Chatpinyakoo, 2019). The search was conducted in January 2020 using a Boolean query combining three conceptual blocks: educational policy terms, equity and access terms, and Southeast Asian geographic identifiers. [Table 1](#) details the search strategy.

Table 1. Search Strategy and Database Sources

Component	Details
Databases	Scopus; Web of Science Core Collection
Block 1 (Policy)	"education* policy" OR "education* reform" OR "education* governance"
Block 2 (Equity/Access)	"equit*" OR "access" OR "inclusi*" OR "disparit*" OR "inequalit*"
Block 3 (Region)	"Southeast Asia" OR "ASEAN" OR Indonesia OR Thailand OR Malaysia OR Philippines OR Vietnam OR Singapore OR Myanmar OR Cambodia OR Laos OR Brunei
Boolean Logic	Block 1 AND Block 2 AND Block 3
Time Frame	2010–2019
Document Type	Journal articles (peer-reviewed)
Language	English

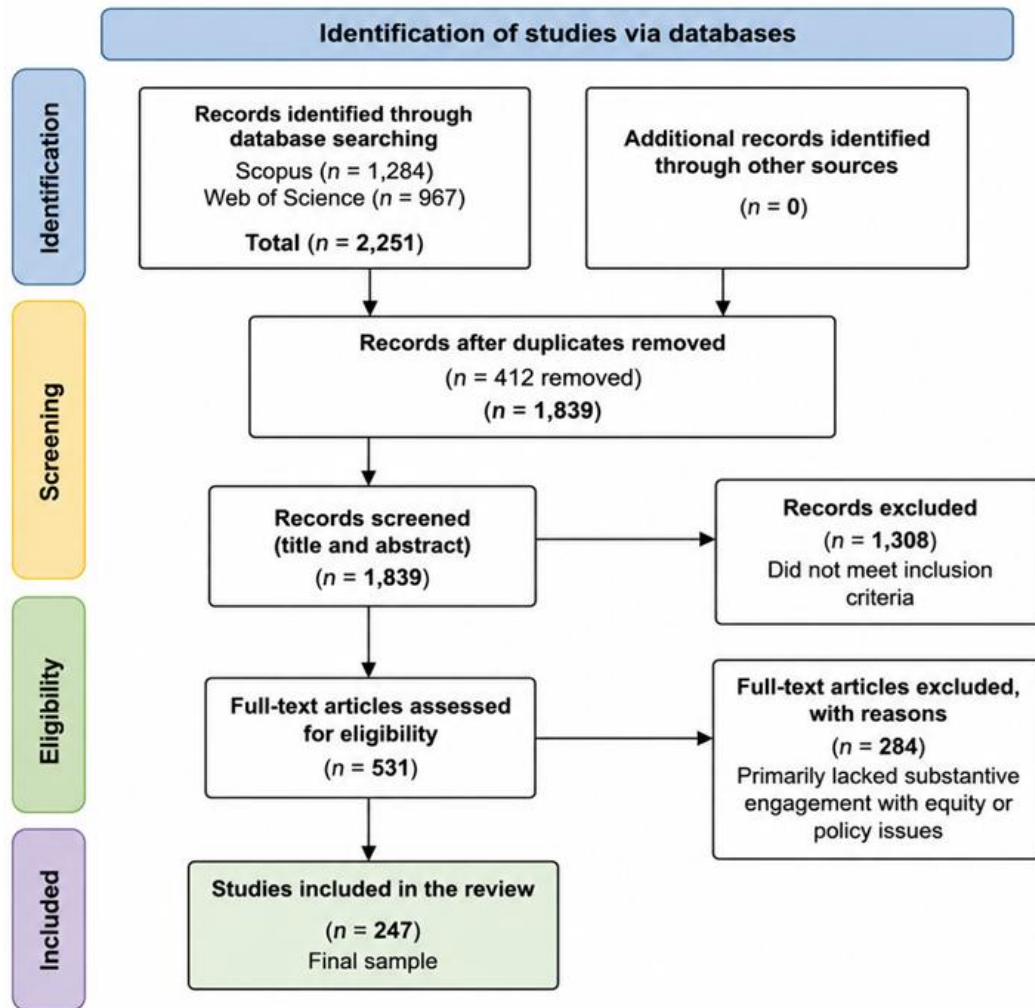
3.3 Inclusion, Exclusion, and Screening

Inclusion criteria required that articles (a) address educational policy at the primary, secondary, or system level; (b) engage substantively with equity, access, or inclusion issues; (c) focus empirically or analytically on one or more Southeast Asian countries; and (d) be published in English-language, peer-reviewed journals between 2010 and 2019. Exclusion criteria removed conference proceedings, book chapters, editorial commentaries, and studies dealing exclusively with higher education or purely technical subjects unrelated to equity. [Table 2](#) summarizes these criteria.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Addresses educational policy (K–12 or system-level)	Conference proceedings, book chapters, editorials
Engages with equity, access, or inclusion themes	Exclusively higher-education or TVET focused
Focuses on Southeast Asian country/countries	No substantive policy dimension
Published 2010–2019 in peer-reviewed journals	Non-English language publications
English language	Duplicate records across databases

The PRISMA protocol guided the screening process (Moher et al., 2009). An initial search yielded 1,284 records from Scopus and 967 from WoS. After removing 412 duplicates, 1,839 unique records remained. Title and abstract screening eliminated 1,308 records that did not meet the inclusion criteria. Full-text assessment of the remaining 531 articles resulted in the exclusion of 284 articles, primarily because they lacked substantive engagement with equity or policy issues. The final sample comprised 247 articles. **Figure 1** illustrates the PRISMA flow.

**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram of study selection process (N = 247).

3.4 Analytical Tools and Procedures

Bibliometric analysis was conducted using multiple tools. VOSviewer (version 1.6.15) was used to generate keyword co-occurrence networks, co-citation maps, and country collaboration visualizations. Biblioshiny, the web interface of the R bibliometrix package, facilitated thematic evolution analysis and source growth tracking. Publish or Perish was employed to calculate citation metrics including h-index, g-index, and average citations per article. Scopus Analyzer provided supplementary descriptive statistics on publication distribution by country, institution, and year. The systematic review component followed a thematic synthesis approach, with articles coded according to their primary policy focus, methodological orientation, country coverage, and key findings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Publication Trends

The 247 articles included in the final sample show a clear upward publication trend over the decade. Annual output rose from 11 articles in 2010 to 42 in 2019, with particularly sharp increases observed in 2014 (from 16 to 25 articles) and again in 2017 (from 30 to 38 articles). This growth trajectory mirrors broader trends in education research output from the Asia-Pacific region and likely reflects both the expansion of doctoral programs in Southeast Asian universities and the increasing availability of competitive research funding (Hallinger and Bryant, 2013). **Figure 2** displays the annual publication trends.

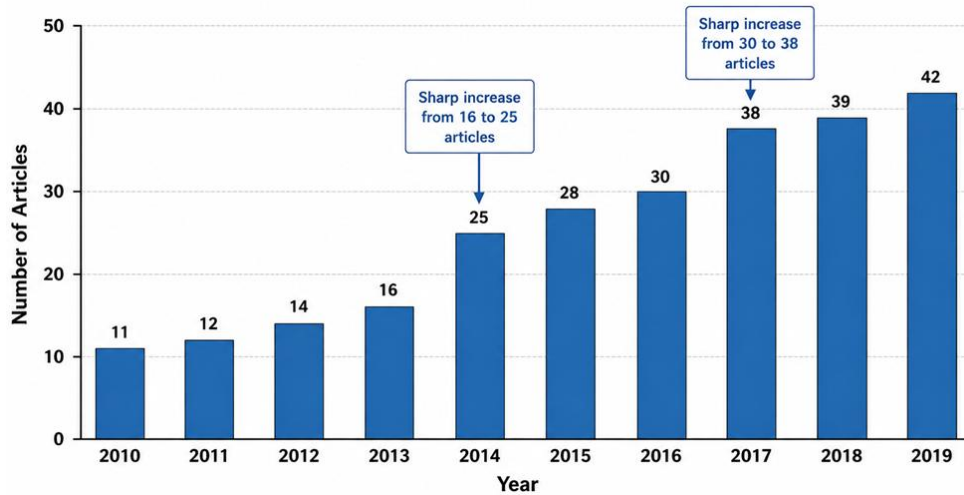


Figure 2. Publication Trends in Algorithmic Thinking and Secondary Mathematics Education (2010-2023)

4.2 Most Productive Countries and Institutions

Country-level analysis reveals that Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia collectively account for 58% of all publications. Thailand leads with 52 articles, followed by Malaysia (48) and Indonesia (43). Singapore, despite its smaller population, ranks fourth with 31 articles, a reflection of its well-funded research universities. The Philippines (27), Vietnam (22), and Cambodia (11) constitute a second tier, while Myanmar, Laos, and Brunei together contribute only 13 articles. This distribution aligns with patterns of research capacity and funding across the region (Brock and Symaco, 2011). **Table 3** summarizes the country and institutional productivity data.

Table 3. Most Productive Countries and Leading Institutions

Country	Articles	Leading Institution	Inst. Articles
Thailand	52	Chulalongkorn University	14
Malaysia	48	University of Malaya	16
Indonesia	43	Universitas Indonesia	11
Singapore	31	National Univ. of Singapore	18
Philippines	27	Univ. of the Philippines	9
Vietnam	22	Vietnam National University	7
Cambodia	11	Royal Univ. of Phnom Penh	4
Others (MM, LA, BN)	13	Various	—

4.3 Most Cited Articles and Influential Authors

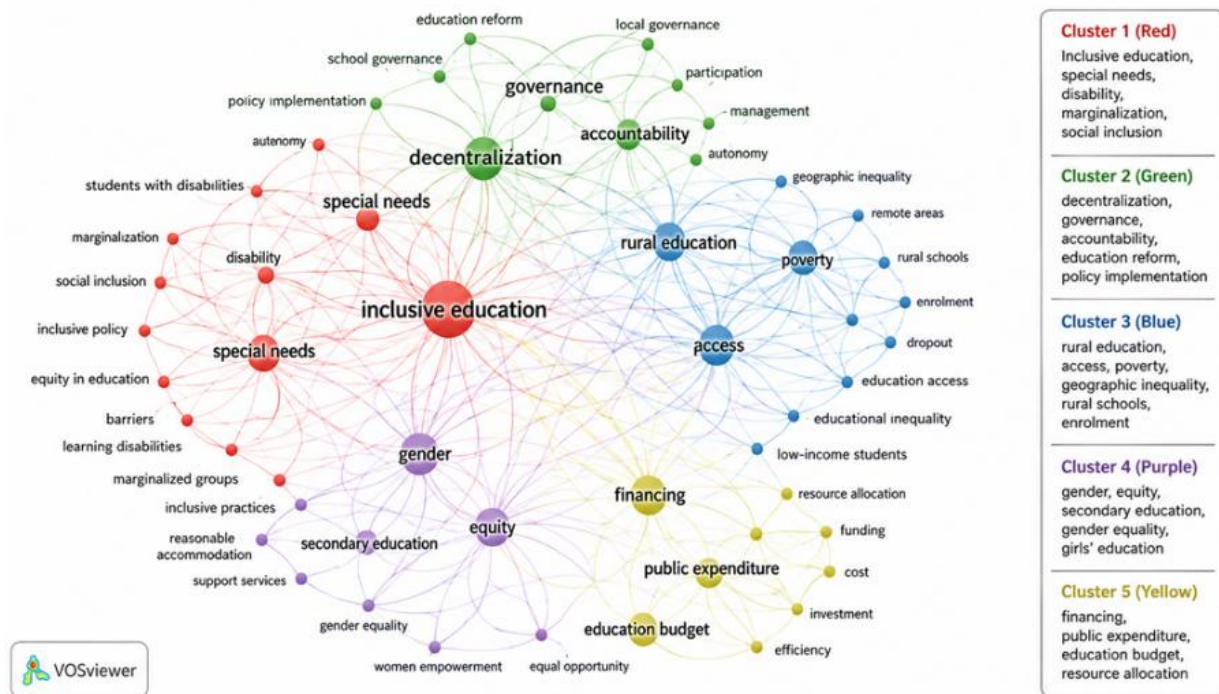
Citation analysis identifies several highly influential works. The five most cited articles, listed in **Table 4**, span topics from decentralization outcomes in Indonesia to inclusive education policy in Thailand. Notably, the top-cited article by Kristiansen and Pratikno (2011), with 87 citations, critically examines the equity effects of Indonesian decentralization, reflecting the centrality of governance reform debates in the regional literature. Hallinger and Bryant (2013) rank second with 74 citations for their bibliometric review of educational leadership research in Southeast Asia, indicating methodological interest in mapping regional scholarship. The h-index for the entire corpus is 28, and the average citation count per article is 12.4, figures that suggest moderate but growing scholarly impact.

Table 4. Top Five Most Cited Articles

Author(s)	Title (abbreviated)	Journal	Year	Citations
Kristiansen & Pratikno	Decentralising education in Indonesia	Int. J. Educ. Dev.	2011	87
Hallinger & Bryant	Mapping educational leadership in SE Asia	J. Educ. Admin.	2013	74
Suharti	Equity policy and provincial disparities	Educ. Res. Policy Pract.	2013	61
Symaco & Tee	Indigenous education policy in ASEAN	Compare	2019	53
Bjork	Local responses to decentralization policy	Comp. Educ. Rev.	2013	48

4.4 Keyword Co-occurrence and Thematic Mapping

VOSviewer analysis of author keywords with a minimum occurrence threshold of five identified 38 keywords forming five distinct clusters. The largest cluster, centered on "inclusive education" and "special needs," reflects the growing attention to disability and marginalization within regional policy discourse. A second cluster groups "decentralization," "governance," and "accountability," capturing the governance reform literature. The third cluster connects "rural education," "access," and "poverty," highlighting the persistent challenge of geographic inequality. A fourth cluster links "gender," "equity," and "secondary education," while a fifth, smaller cluster brings together "financing," "public expenditure," and "education budget."

**Figure 3.** Keyword co-occurrence network visualization (minimum threshold = 5 occurrences).**Table 5.** Dominant Research Themes Identified from Keyword Clustering

Cluster	Core Keywords	Theme Label	Articles (%)
1 (Red)	inclusive education, special needs, disability	Inclusive Education Policy	28%
2 (Green)	decentralization, governance, accountability	Governance Reform	24%
3 (Blue)	rural education, access, poverty	Rural Access Disparities	22%
4 (Yellow)	gender, equity, secondary education	Gender Equity	15%
5 (Purple)	financing, public expenditure, budget	Educational Financing	11%

4.5 Country Collaboration Networks

The country collaboration map generated by VOSviewer reveals that international partnerships are predominantly dyadic rather than multilateral, and they tend to link Southeast Asian countries with external partners rather than with each other. Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are the most frequent collaborating nations, reflecting longstanding development aid relationships and doctoral training pipelines. Intra-ASEAN collaboration is notably weak, with only 14 of the 247 articles involving authors from two or more ASEAN member states. Singapore serves as the most connected intra-regional node, co-authoring with scholars from Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. **Figure 4** displays the collaboration network.

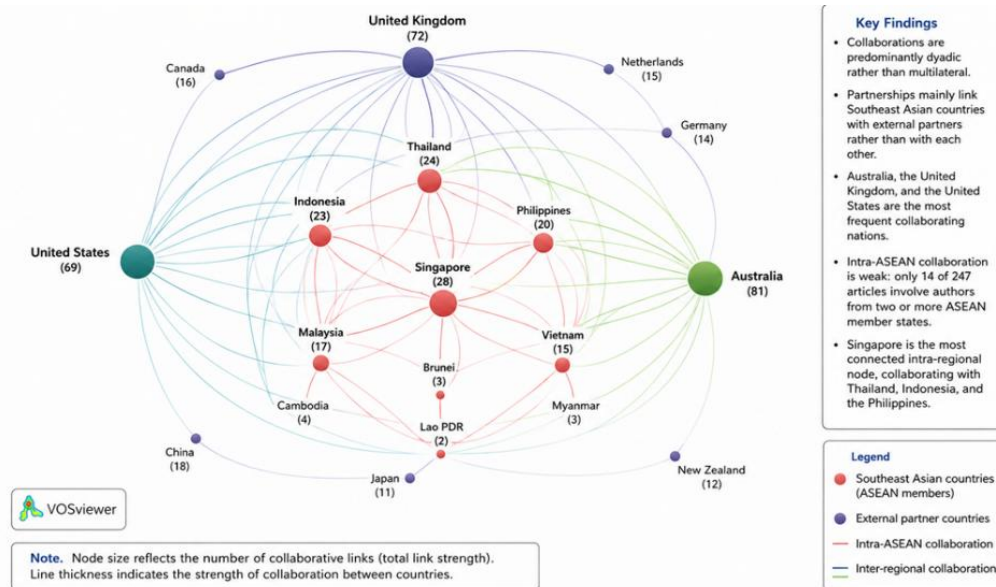
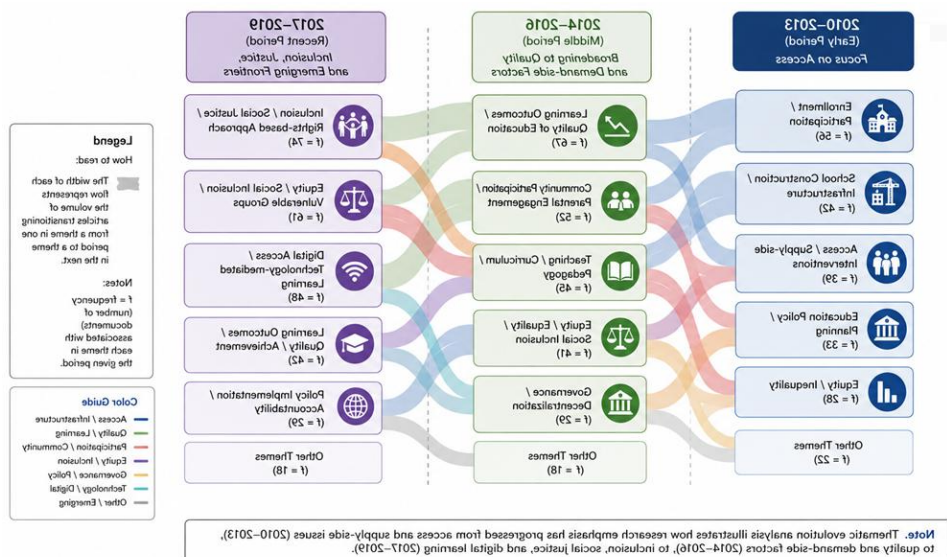


Figure 4. Country collaboration network in educational policy research on equity and access in Southeast Asia

4.6 Thematic Evolution

Biblioshiny thematic evolution analysis reveals a discernible shift in research focus over the decade. During the early period (2010 to 2013), the literature was dominated by studies of educational access in terms of enrollment, school construction, and supply-side interventions. From 2014 to 2016, the discourse broadened to include quality, learning outcomes, and demand-side factors such as community participation and parental engagement. The most recent period (2017 to 2019) shows the emergence of inclusion, social justice, and rights-based framing as central organizing concepts, alongside growing attention to digital access and technology-mediated learning. **Figure 5** visualizes this thematic evolution.



4.7 Systematic Review Synthesis

The systematic review component synthesizes findings across the five thematic clusters identified through bibliometric analysis. **Table 6** provides a structured summary. In the inclusive education cluster, studies document significant gaps between policy rhetoric and classroom reality. While countries such as Thailand and Malaysia have adopted inclusive education frameworks aligned with international conventions, teacher preparation, resource allocation, and community attitudes remain formidable implementation barriers (Carm, 2013; ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). Research in this cluster is predominantly qualitative, relying on case studies and interviews, and is concentrated in a small number of countries, with limited comparative work.

Table 6. Summary of Systematic Review Findings by Thematic Cluster

Theme	Key Findings	Dominant Methods	Gaps Identified
Inclusive Education	Policy-practice gap; teacher unpreparedness; attitudinal barriers	Qualitative case studies	Limited comparative studies
Governance Reform	Decentralization yields mixed equity outcomes; elite capture risk	Mixed methods; policy analysis	Longitudinal impact evaluations
Rural Access	Geographic remoteness compounds socioeconomic disadvantage	Quantitative; large-scale surveys	Under-studied countries (MM, LA)
Gender Equity	Aggregate gains mask sub-group disparities; intersectionality under-explored	Quantitative; secondary data	Intersectional analyses
Financing	Inadequate public spending linked to access gaps; PPP evidence weak	Econometric; budget analysis	Cost-effectiveness studies

The governance reform cluster contains the most methodologically diverse body of work. Studies range from large-scale quantitative analyses of expenditure data (World Bank, 2018) to ethnographic investigations of local governance dynamics in Indonesian districts (Bjork, 2013). A recurring finding is that decentralization reforms have not uniformly improved educational access; outcomes depend heavily on the capacity of subnational governments, the presence of accountability mechanisms, and the degree to which reforms are accompanied by fiscal transfers earmarked for equity-enhancing programs (Kristiansen and Pratikno, 2011; King, 2014).

Research on rural access disparities consistently documents the compounding effects of geographic remoteness, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure. In Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos, children in remote rural areas are two to three times more likely to be out of school than their urban counterparts (UNESCO, 2015). Studies highlight the importance of multigrade teaching, mobile schools, and community learning centers as adaptive strategies, but evidence on their effectiveness and scalability remains limited (Marphatia et al., 2010). The under-representation of the least developed ASEAN nations in the research corpus is itself a significant finding, as it suggests that the countries facing the most severe access challenges are also those least studied.

4.8 Discussion

The bibliometric and systematic findings reported above converge on several important conclusions that merit extended discussion. The steady growth in publication output over the decade signals a maturing research community, yet the concentration of productivity in three countries, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, raises questions about whether the scholarly literature adequately represents the diversity of educational realities across the region. Countries such as Myanmar, Laos, and Brunei are significantly under-represented, a pattern attributable to research infrastructure limitations but one that nonetheless creates blind spots in the regional knowledge base (Brock and Symaco, 2011).

The weak intra-ASEAN collaboration network is a particularly striking finding. Despite the existence of regional frameworks such as the SEAMEO network and the ASEAN University Network, scholarly collaboration on educational policy remains predominantly oriented toward external partners in the Global North. This pattern echoes broader critiques of academic dependency in developing regions (Welch, 2010) and suggests that capacity-building initiatives focused on South-South research collaboration could significantly enrich the field. The predominance of English-language publications in the sample may also contribute to this pattern, as scholars in non-Anglophone countries may publish in national languages that are not indexed in Scopus or WoS.

The thematic evolution from access-quantity toward access-quality-inclusion reflects a conceptual maturation that parallels global trends in education policy discourse. The early emphasis on enrollment and infrastructure aligns with the Millennium Development Goals framework, which prioritized universal primary education (Tikly and Barrett, 2011). The subsequent shift toward quality and inclusion corresponds to the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals agenda, which frames education as a vehicle for reducing inequality and promoting social justice (Unterhalter, 2012). This evolution demonstrates that Southeast Asian education policy research has been responsive to international normative shifts, although the degree to which global frameworks are adapted to local contexts varies considerably.

The dominance of inclusive education as a keyword cluster deserves particular attention. While the growth of inclusion-related research is encouraging, the systematic review reveals a significant gap between policy adoption and implementation. Several ASEAN countries have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and incorporated inclusive education language into national legislation, yet classroom-level practice frequently fails to reflect these commitments (Carm, 2013). Research in this area tends to be descriptive rather than evaluative, documenting the existence of policies without rigorously assessing their impact on educational outcomes for marginalized groups.

The governance and financing clusters together point to a fundamental tension in regional educational policy: the aspiration for equity-oriented reform versus the institutional and fiscal constraints that limit its realization. Decentralization was widely promoted as a governance solution that would enhance local responsiveness and accountability, but the evidence synthesized in this review suggests that without sufficient institutional capacity and anti-corruption safeguards, decentralization can exacerbate rather than reduce inequality (Kristiansen and Pratikno, 2011; Shoraku, 2013). Similarly, the financing literature reveals that public expenditure levels in the least developed ASEAN states remain far below what is needed to achieve universal access, and innovative financing mechanisms have yet to demonstrate scalable equity benefits.

Methodologically, the corpus is characterized by a preponderance of qualitative single-country case studies. While such studies provide valuable contextual depth, the relative scarcity of cross-national comparative designs limits the capacity to identify generalizable policy lessons and to distinguish country-specific factors from region-wide dynamics (Bray and Thomas, 2013). Quantitative studies, where present, tend to rely on secondary data from international surveys rather than purpose-designed instruments, and mixed-methods research remains the exception rather than the norm. The field would benefit from greater methodological pluralism and from investment in longitudinal research designs that can capture the dynamic effects of policy interventions over time.

Connecting these bibliometric findings to theoretical frameworks, the results affirm the relevance of human capital theory, which predicts that investment in education yields economic returns, but they also expose its limitations. Human capital theory alone cannot explain the persistence of educational inequality in countries that have substantially increased education budgets (Lee, 2013). Social justice and capabilities theories provide more nuanced analytical lenses, drawing attention to the distributional consequences of policy choices and to the non-economic dimensions of educational value (Unterhalter, 2012). The thematic evolution observed in this study suggests that the field is gradually incorporating these broader theoretical perspectives, but more explicit theoretical engagement in primary studies would strengthen the scholarly conversation.

A conceptual framework synthesizing the key relationships identified in this review is presented in **Figure 6**. The framework positions educational policy at the intersection of governance structures, financing mechanisms, and socio-cultural contexts, with equity and access outcomes as the dependent dimension. The five thematic clusters identified in the bibliometric analysis represent distinct but interconnected pathways through which policy shapes educational opportunities across the region.

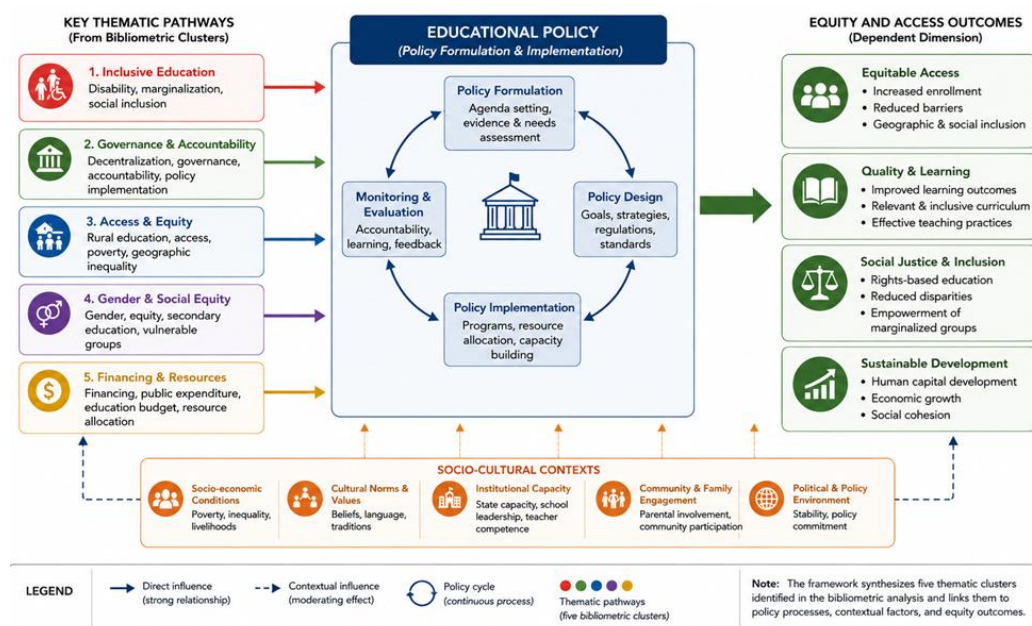


Figure 6. Conceptual framework synthesizing the relationships among educational policy dimensions, contextual factors, and equity/access outcomes in Southeast Asia.

5. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study has mapped the landscape of educational policy research on equity and access in Southeast Asia between 2010 and 2019 through an integrated bibliometric and systematic review of 247 peer-reviewed articles. The analysis reveals a growing but unevenly distributed body of scholarship. Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia dominate the production side, while the countries facing the most acute access challenges, notably Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, remain significantly under-studied. Publication output has increased steadily across the decade, with thematic emphasis shifting from supply-side access concerns toward quality, inclusion, and social justice frameworks.

The study makes three principal contributions. Theoretically, it demonstrates how bibliometric mapping can reveal the intellectual structure and conceptual evolution of an inherently interdisciplinary field. Methodologically, it illustrates the complementary strengths of bibliometric analysis and systematic thematic synthesis, an integrated approach that generates insights unavailable to either method independently. Substantively, it identifies five thematic clusters, inclusive education policy, governance reform, rural access disparities, gender equity, and educational financing, and documents the research gaps within each.

Several policy implications follow from these findings. First, ASEAN member states should invest in research infrastructure in under-studied countries to ensure that policy decisions across the region rest on adequate evidence bases. Second, intra-regional research collaboration should be actively promoted through joint funding mechanisms and researcher exchange programs. Third, policymakers should attend to the implementation gap documented in the inclusive education literature, moving beyond policy adoption toward sustained investment in teacher training, resource provision, and community engagement. Fourth, governance reforms, particularly decentralization initiatives, require robust accountability mechanisms and targeted fiscal transfers to prevent exacerbation of existing inequalities.

This review is subject to several limitations. The restriction to Scopus and WoS databases may have excluded relevant research published in regional journals not indexed in these databases or in languages other than English. The time frame of 2010 to 2019, while capturing a significant period of policy activity, does not encompass more recent developments. The bibliometric indicators employed, while widely accepted, are sensitive to database coverage and citation practices that may vary across countries and disciplines.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should address the gaps identified in this review along several fronts. Longitudinal studies tracking the equity impacts of specific policy interventions over multiple years are critically needed, as the current evidence base is overwhelmingly cross-sectional. Comparative studies spanning multiple ASEAN countries using consistent analytical frameworks would enable more robust identification of the institutional and contextual factors that condition policy effectiveness. Research designs that combine quantitative impact evaluation with qualitative process tracing would help explain not only whether policies work but why and under what conditions they succeed or fail.

The emerging issue of digital inequality warrants dedicated attention. As Southeast Asian education systems increasingly incorporate technology-mediated learning, new dimensions of access disparity are emerging along the digital divide. Studies examining how educational governance structures adapt to digital transformation, and how policy can mitigate rather than reinforce digital inequalities, represent a promising and timely research frontier. AI-assisted educational governance tools and their implications for equity deserve exploration as education systems modernize their data collection and decision-making processes. Cross-country analyses of policy implementation that attend to the political economy of education reform, including the roles of international organizations, domestic interest groups, and civil society actors, would enrich the predominantly technocratic orientation of current scholarship.

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