

A Comparative Analysis of Secondary School Curricula in Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia: Integrating Self-Regulated Learning and Life Planning Skills

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, secondary education is increasingly expected to move beyond academic achievement to equip students with the competencies to navigate complex, rapidly changing social and economic contexts. Among these, Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) and life and career planning skills are essential for fostering autonomy, adaptability, and lifelong learning. This article provides a comparative analysis of secondary school curricula in Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, focusing on how SRL and life planning are incorporated within each system.

The analysis reveals that Singapore incorporates SRL and life planning coherently through initiatives such as Character and Citizenship Education (CCE), Education and Career Guidance (ECG), subject-based banding reforms, and portfolio-based assessment. Malaysia adopts a balanced approach, embedding Kemahiran Insaniah (soft skills) across academic and co-curricular domains, guided by the Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013-2025, and School-Based Assessment (PBS/Pentaksiran Berasaskan Sekolah). In contrast, Thailand's Basic Education Core Curriculum, 2008, remains largely exam-oriented, providing limited opportunities to cultivate SRL and life planning competencies.

Drawing on these findings, the article proposes a reform framework emphasizing SRL integration, dedicated life planning modules, enhanced co-curricular programs, teacher mentorship, and diversified assessment. Aligned with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s vision for "future-ready learners", the model aims to balance academic rigor with essential life competencies.

Keywords: Curriculum Comparison, Secondary Education, Self-Regulated Learning (SRL), Life Planning, Soft Skills

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, education systems worldwide face increasing pressure to move beyond the transmission of academic knowledge and incorporate the soft skills necessary for navigating complexity in modern societies. The OECD. Future of Education and Skills 2030 emphasizes that today's learners must be adaptable, autonomous, and capable of making informed life decisions in uncertain contexts (OECD, 2018). Among these competencies, Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)—the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one's own learning—and life planning—the capacity to envision personal and career trajectories—stand out as indispensable.

Self-regulated learning is not an innate ability but a definable skill set that can be developed to help students direct their own learning processes. It is a self-directive process and a set of behaviors whereby learners transform their mental abilities into skills and habits. This includes cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and emotional aspects of learning, encompassing abilities such as goal setting, self-monitoring, and the strategic selection of learning approaches. Similarly, life planning skills are foundational executive function skills that enable students to organize their time, manage workloads, and set short- and long-term goals for both academic and personal success. These competencies are essential for fostering a mindset of lifelong learning and adaptability.

In the ASEAN region, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia have each undertaken significant educational reform over the past two decades. These countries share cultural and developmental similarities but differ in how they integrate SRL and life planning into secondary school curricula. Singapore is recognized globally for its performance on international assessments, supported by systemic reforms that embed flexibility and future readiness. Malaysia's reforms highlight holistic development and soft skills, particularly through the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia [MEM], 2013). Thailand, however, continues to operate within a heavily exam-driven paradigm under the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (Ministry of Education Thailand [MOE], 2008), which provides limited scope for SRL and life planning.

This study undertakes a comparative curriculum analysis to (1) examine how SRL and life planning are addressed in the secondary school curricula of Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia; (2) highlight the distinctive features and challenges within each system; and (3) propose a model for embedding SRL and life planning into Thailand's curriculum.

Comparative Curriculum Analysis

The secondary school curricula of Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia reveal both shared goals and divergent approaches to soft skills education. All three countries acknowledge the importance of developing students beyond academic achievement; however, the extent and manner of integration differ considerably.

In Thailand, despite a stated commitment to modern educational principles, the education system is marked by a profound contradiction between policy and practice. The Basic Education Core Curriculum (BECC) was designed with the intention of fostering holistic development and key competencies such as self-management, communication, and advanced thinking. The document, for instance, states goals of “knowledge and skills for communication, thinking, problem-solving, technological know-how, and life skills” (MOE, 2008). However, as expert analyses and student feedback reveal, the system remains largely constrained by a persistent and deeply entrenched exam-driven culture. For example, it has been noted that “the Ministry plans to revamp the Basic

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Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (MOE, 2008) for Thai students to focus more on developing analytical skills and career goals”, showing recognition of this deficit (Bangkok Post, 2020). Critics argue that reforms often fail to materialize in the classroom, with changes being superficial rather than substantive shifts in pedagogy, though direct empirical studies are fewer. This fundamental disconnect is rooted in a number of systemic barriers.

The system is highly centralized and bureaucratic, which hampers efforts at school-level autonomy and instructional leadership. While the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (MOE, 2008) envisages a “learner-centered approach” and expects schools and communities to participate in curriculum preparation, in practice, reports highlight a significant lack of resources, particularly in rural schools, where overcrowding is a major issue and access to qualified teachers is limited. Teachers themselves are often overwhelmed with administrative tasks, which reduces the time and energy available for effective instruction.

The central challenge in Thailand’s context is not a lack of vision but a fundamental failure of implementation and political will to overcome these structural obstacles. The BECC 2008 contains the right language, but a student-centered curriculum is almost impossible to implement within a rigid, centralized system that prioritizes rote memorization for high-stakes examinations. This leads to a profound policy–practice gap, where the rhetoric of reform fails to translate into a changed classroom reality. This systemic inertia, in turn, helps explain Thailand’s performance on international assessments—such as PISA—which remains consistently low. There appears to be a discernible link between the centralized administrative structure and resource imbalances, which may hinder effective implementation and widen the gap between policy and practice, ultimately influencing student outcomes in international assessments (Line Today, 2024; Merzouk, 2025; The Asia Foundation, 2025).

For Thailand to truly prepare its students for the twenty-first century, it must move beyond superficial reforms and address the core structural issues that impede meaningful educational change.

By contrast, Singapore’s education system serves as a powerful case study in the strategic, top-down implementation of a holistic vision for student development. The Singapore Ministry of Education’s long-term vision is centered on nurturing the “joy of learning” and developing “multiple pathways to cater to the different strengths and interests of our students” (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2022). This vision is operationalized through a cohesive ecosystem of institutionalized frameworks that synergistically cultivate self-regulated learning and life-planning skills, moving beyond mere policy rhetoric to achieve tangible, systemic change (SEAMEO RECSAM, 2016).

One critical mechanism is the Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum. CCE is not confined to a single subject; it is integrated across various platforms, including weekly lessons, National Education events, co-curricular activities, and daily teacher–student interactions. For example, its learning outcomes include developing self-awareness and self-management skills, social awareness and interpersonal skills, resilience, and reflection for community, national, and global issues. Complementing this is the ECG framework, which provides a structured, developmental approach to life planning—awareness, exploration, and planning—with dedicated counsellors and resources enabling students to explore their interests, skills, and make informed decisions about their education and careers. Finally, the structural reform known as Full Subject-Based Banding (Full SBB) allows students to take individual subjects at levels that match their learning needs, giving them greater agency in their academic

journeys. The success of Singapore lies not in any single program but in the synergistic and institutionalized nature of its educational ecosystem. The advocacy of multiple pathways is made possible by structural reform (Full SBB), supported by guidance (ECG) and values/character education (CCE). Its student outcomes on PISA and TIMSS reflect a system that develops self-aware, proactive, and resilient learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; Ng Ann Secondary School, 2025; NUS High School of Mathematics and Science, 2025; Singapore Ministry of Education, 2023; Workforce Singapore, 2025).

In Malaysia, the education system is currently in a deliberate and long-term transition, guided by the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 (MEM, 2013). This comprehensive plan is a multi-phase, 13-year transformation designed to elevate the entire system to meet global standards. The blueprint is built on five core aspirations—Access, Quality, Equity, Unity, and Efficiency—and it explicitly aims to develop “higher order thinking skills” and values-driven citizens, signifying a clear policy intent to move beyond a traditional, exam-centric model. A core tenet of this approach is the integration of “Kemahiran Insaniah” (soft skills) across the curriculum. These skills are intended to be central to student development, embedded in both academic subjects and co-curricular activities. For example, the Blueprint explicitly states that by 2016, higher-order thinking questions will make up 80% of UPSR questions covering a range of formats, including multiple-choice and subjective questions; 80% of form 3 central assessment; and 75% of SPM core subjects: English language, Mathematics, and History. A key structural reform has been the shift to School-Based Assessment (PBS/Pentaksiran Berasaskan Sekolah) as well as the abolition of centralized exams (UPSR and PT3) in favour of more holistic assessment, including co-curricular and psychometric evaluation (Bernama, 2022; Bangkok Post, 2020; British Council, 2025; Cerebrate Education, 2025; Chongfu School, 2025; Chung Cheng High School (Main), 2025; Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2013; Myprivatetutor. my, 2025).

Malaysia’s framework demonstrates a strong, top-down intent for reform, but its outcomes suggest a system in the process of change rather than one that has fully matured. The nation’s performance in international assessments remains significantly below that of Singapore, though above Thailand in some cases. This illustrates a crucial point: An ambitious, long-term policy is necessary, but not sufficient; its success depends upon deep implementation and embedding of practices across the system.

A comparative synthesis of the three nations reveals a clear continuum of educational reform maturity. Singapore is at the stage of integrated, institutionalized reform, where policies work in concert to develop future-ready learners. Malaysia is in an active, multi-year transition, actively working to implement a comprehensive blueprint that shifts the focus towards holistic development. Thailand, however, remains a system where the stated vision of reform is fundamentally undermined by a deeply entrenched exam-driven culture and system barriers that prevent meaningful change.

The effectiveness of each approach is empirically validated by its performance on international assessments. Singapore’s world-leading PISA and TIMSS scores (TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, 2019; The Global Economy.com, 2022) reflect a system that has successfully fostered the very skills of critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-regulation that these tests measure (see Table 1). Malaysia’s scores, which are at or near the international average, demonstrate that its reform efforts are beginning to yield results. However, the system has not yet fully closed the gap with global leaders. Thailand’s consistently below-average performance serves as a stark indicator of the policy-practice gap and the challenges of a system

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that still prioritizes rote memorization over the cultivation of essential competencies.

Table 1 PISA 2018 and 2022 scores

Country	Math		Reading		Science	
	2018	2022	2018	2022	2018	2022
Malaysia	440	409	415	388	438	416
Singapore	569	575	549	543	551	561
Thailand	419	394	393	379	426	409
OECD Average	489	472	487	476	489	485

Source: OECD, 2023

*PISA is an abbreviation for Program for International Student Assessment. The test assesses the mathematical, reading, and scientific abilities of 15-year-old students.

Table 2 Summarizes the Key Elements of Self-Skills and Life-Skills Integration in the Secondary Curricula of the Three Countries

Aspect	Thailand	Singapore	Malaysia
Curriculum Framework	Core Curriculum (Basic Education Core Curriculum) – focuses on academic subjects with life skills as part of “Learner Development Activities”	National Curriculum with strong emphasis on Character and Citizenship Education (CCE)	Integrated Secondary School Curriculum – includes Kemahiran Insaniah (soft skills) and co-curricular activities
Soft Skills Focus	General life skills, moral education, guidance & counselling	CCE emphasizes values, resilience, decision-making, and self-management	Explicit soft skills integration: Teamwork, communication, leadership, problem-solving
Life Planning Components	Limited: Mainly in advisory/guidance periods, and teacher counselling	Education and Career Guidance (ECG) framework, portfolio system, structured career guidance	Career planning is embedded in the Life Skills subject and the School-Based Assessment
Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)	An implicit, teacher-centered approach limits student autonomy	Strong SRL through project work, inquiry-based learning, and reflection journals	Some SRL via project-based tasks, group assignments, and student leadership roles

Table 2 Summarizes the Key Elements of Self-Skills and Life-Skills Integration in the Secondary Curricula of the Three Countries (Con.)

Aspect	Thailand	Singapore	Malaysia
Teaching Approach	Predominantly exam-focused, teacher-led, and limited project-based learning	Student-centered, blended learning, emphasis on reflection & goal-setting	A combination of academic and co-curricular activities, emphasis on holistic development
Assessment	National exams (O-NET, etc.) dominate, with less on soft skills assessment	Holistic assessment: Academic + portfolio + CCE reflections	School-Based Assessment (PBS) includes academic + co-curricular participation
Strengths	Strong academic foundation, structured curriculum	Well-structured integration of values & life planning; clear support for SRL	Explicit soft skills integration; balanced co-curricular focus
Weaknesses/ Gaps	Soft skills not clearly embedded; life planning underdeveloped	Heavy academic pressure may limit creativity	Implementation challenges the urban-rural gap in resources

Overall, while Singapore demonstrates a highly structured integration of SRL and life planning, and Malaysia highlights explicit soft skills within co-curricular activities, Thailand still faces significant gaps in embedding these competencies within its curriculum.

Theoretical Framework

The integration of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) and life planning skills into secondary school curricula has become increasingly relevant in the 21st century, as students must adapt to rapidly changing educational and career landscapes. These skills are not only essential for academic achievement but also for lifelong learning and personal development.

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) has been widely conceptualized as a cyclical process through which learners take active control of their cognitive, motivational, and behavioral engagement in learning tasks. According to Zimmerman (2002), SRL comprises three interrelated phases: forethought (goal setting and strategic planning), performance (self-monitoring and regulation), and self-reflection (evaluation and adaptation). These phases emphasize that SRL is not an innate trait but a set of skills and strategies that can be explicitly taught and developed.

Research consistently demonstrates that SRL is positively associated with autonomy, resilience, adaptability, and academic achievement (Panadero, 2017). Learners who acquire SRL skills are better able to direct their own learning, transfer strategies across contexts, and sustain motivation in the face of challenges. In practice, SRL can be cultivated in classrooms

via project-based learning, portfolio assessment, peer feedback, and reflective journaling—approaches that foster metacognitive awareness and empower students to assume ownership of their educational trajectories, preparing them for lifelong learning and adaptability beyond the classroom (Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy Center [TEAL], 2010; Teaching and Learning Lab, 2025; Structural Learning, 2025).

Life Planning Skills

Life planning refers to the capacity of learners to set academic, career, and personal goals, make informed decisions, and design pathways toward achieving them. At its core, life planning involves decision-making, problem-solving, and career exploration, aligning closely with Savickas' (2013) framework of career construction, which emphasizes adaptability and future orientation. These skills are not innate but can be developed through deliberate educational interventions that foster self-reflection, exploration of opportunities, and strategic action planning.

In practice, life planning is frequently supported by structured programs within secondary education. For example, Singapore's ECG program systematically equips students with tools to envision future aspirations and align them with academic pathways. Similarly, Malaysia embeds life skills subjects and co-curricular activities into its curriculum to prepare learners for both academic and non-academic trajectories. Such initiatives illustrate how educational systems can cultivate life planning skills by integrating mentorship, career guidance, and experiential learning opportunities. Ultimately, life planning fosters learners' capacity to organize their time, manage transitions, and sustain long-term adaptability, thereby equipping them to navigate the uncertainties of the twenty-first century.

ASEAN Educational Philosophies

Both SRL and life planning align with regional philosophies of holistic education. Malaysia's National Education Philosophy emphasizes intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical development. Singapore's Desired Outcomes of Education include self-management, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Thailand's curriculum aspires to learner development but remains constrained by centralized exams and rote learning.

For Thailand, the integration of SRL and life planning within the curriculum remains underdeveloped. While advisory sessions and guidance activities exist, they often lack systematic implementation and measurable outcomes. To address this gap, Thailand could adopt a more structured approach by embedding SRL strategies into core subjects and providing dedicated modules on life planning. Activities such as student-led goal-setting workshops, reflective learning portfolios, and career exploration projects could encourage students to take responsibility for their learning while also envisioning and preparing for their future.

A Proposed Integration Model for Thailand

To bridge the persistent gaps in Thailand's secondary school curriculum and better equip students with both academic knowledge and essential soft skills, this study proposes an integration model for embedding Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) and life planning. Rather than positioning these competencies as supplementary add-ons, the model emphasizes their systematic incorporation into existing curricular structures. Grounded in insights drawn from the successful practices of Singapore and Malaysia, the proposed framework is strategic and multi-layered, designed to address Thailand's structural and pedagogical challenges. It aims to connect policy intentions with classroom realities by embedding SRL into subject teaching, integrating dedicated

life-planning modules, strengthening co-curricular opportunities, enhancing teacher training, and diversifying assessment practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Sarasean, 2024).

1. Embed SRL in core subjects through learning journals, project work, and inquiry-based learning.

SRL strategies can be integrated directly into academic subjects such as mathematics, science, and languages. For instance, teachers may guide students to set specific learning goals at the beginning of each unit, track their progress through learning journals, and reflect on strategies that work best for them. Project-based learning and inquiry-based tasks can also encourage self-management and critical thinking, helping students become active participants rather than passive recipients.

2. Establish dedicated life planning modules, including career weeks, alumni mentoring, and reflective portfolios.

Life planning should be developed as a structured component within the curriculum. This could include:

- Goal-setting workshops where students define short- and long-term academic and personal goals.

- Career exploration activities, such as job shadowing, alumni talks, or career weeks.

- Personal development portfolios where students record aspirations, achievements, and reflective essays about their progress.

3. Strengthen co-curricular integration with student leadership, clubs, and service projects tied to reflection activities.

Co-curricular programs offer practical avenues to practice soft skills. Student clubs, leadership roles, and community service projects provide authentic contexts for students to develop teamwork, communication, and decision-making abilities. Embedding reflection sessions within these activities ensures that students connect their experiences with learning, linking to life planning and SRL principles.

4. Enhance teacher training with SRL-focused professional development and mentorship systems.

Teachers play a pivotal role in modeling SRL and guiding life planning. Professional development programs should train teachers to incorporate reflective learning techniques, coaching strategies, and mentoring approaches. In addition, mentorship systems—where teachers or senior students mentor younger learners—can reinforce the application of these skills in real-life contexts.

5. Adopt alternative assessments such as portfolios, self-assessments, and student-led conferences.

To monitor the effectiveness of integration, schools can adopt alternative assessment methods such as portfolios, self-assessment checklists, and student-led conferences. These tools not only evaluate student progress in soft skills but also encourage accountability and continuous improvement.

Summary of the Model

The proposed integration model emphasizes:

1. Embedding SRL within core academic subjects.
2. Establishing dedicated life planning modules.
3. Utilizing co-curricular activities for experiential learning.

4. Empowering teachers as facilitators and mentors.
5. Using alternative assessments to capture student growth in soft skills.

For clarity, an example of a curriculum integration model for Thai secondary schools is provided in Appendix A.

By adopting this framework, Thailand's secondary education system can achieve a stronger balance between academic rigor and the cultivation of essential life competencies, thereby preparing students not only for examinations but also for long-term success in both personal and professional domains.

Conclusions

This comparative analysis highlights divergent approaches to embedding future-ready competencies within secondary education in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Singapore demonstrates a highly structured interaction of SRL and life-planning, while Malaysia highlights explicit soft-skills integration within co-curricular and school-based assessment frameworks. Thailand, however, remains constrained by exam-driven traditions that limit the cultivation of SRL and life-planning skills.

To address these gaps, Thailand must move beyond policy statements and embrace structured reforms that strategically embed SRL and life planning within its secondary curriculum. This involves integrating SRL into core subjects, introducing dedicated life-planning modules, strengthening teacher mentorship, leveraging co-curricular opportunities, and diversifying assessment practices. Such reforms would foster learners who are autonomous, adaptable, and resilient, bridging the divide between academic achievement and the competencies demanded by the twenty-first century.

Ultimately, the integration of SRL and life planning is not only a pedagogical necessity but also a socio-economic imperative. Equipping Thai students with the ability to regulate their own learning, envision personal and career pathways, and make informed decisions will enhance individual educational outcomes while contributing to the broader goal of cultivating resilient, responsible, and future-ready citizens.

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