



# POLICY NOTES

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## Sustaining the Spark: Strengthening Southeast Asian Teachers' Interest and Passion for Teaching

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### Salient Points

- Teachers' decisions to remain in the profession in Southeast Asia (SEA) are shaped by three core factors—sense of purpose and fulfillment, interest and passion, and sense of growth and development
- Interest and passion are consistently viewed by Southeast Asian teachers as strong sources of motivational
- Teachers' interest and passion significantly contribute to teacher motivation in six of the ten Southeast Asian countries studied
- Sustaining a healthy level of passion requires enabling conditions, such as professional development, peer support, and curriculum stability

# SUSTAINING THE SPARK



Interest and passion significantly contribute to **teacher motivation** across Southeast Asia.



## Overview

In Southeast Asia, a region marked by a diverse education landscape (Asadullah et al., 2025), nearly one in four people (23%) are aged 0-14 (The Global Economy, n.d.), creating a massive demand for quality basic education. Learning outcomes remain uneven, with Singapore and Vietnam leading their Southeast Asian counterparts while learning poverty persists in other countries (Asadullah et al., 2025).

While many factors are linked to student learning, teachers remain crucial in addressing learning gaps given their strong influence on student achievement (López-Martín, et al., 2023; Burroughs et al., 2019). Although research has shown that teaching practices directly influence learning outcomes, there is also evidence that teacher well-being and job satisfaction indirectly contribute to instructional effectiveness (Viac & Fraser, 2020, as cited in OECD, 2025). Several studies have likewise found that quality teaching, teacher retention, among others, are ensured when sufficient support is provided (OECD, 2025). Hence, it is essential to examine these aspects to clearly determine how teachers can be effectively supported.

## Understanding Interest and Passion in the Teaching Profession

The Southeast Asian Teachers' Motivation (SEA-TM) Framework identifies three interrelated factors shaping teachers' decision to remain in the profession: teachers' sense of purpose and fulfillment, interest and passion, and sense of growth of development (Umali et al., 2024).

Serin (2017) defines passion as a strong tendency and willingness to spend time and energy on activities deemed important. Passionate and committed teachers love their field of study, are excited about teaching, and care about their students. Love for their subject areas entails a deep connection with their field and encourages deeper interest and engagement in these areas (Loui, 2006). Passionate teachers are excited to share their knowledge with their students (Loui, 2006) and are motivated to refine their pedagogical skills to engage learners effectively (Thapan, 1986, as cited in Serin, 2017). They tend to demonstrate genuine concern for their students, helping them develop both competence and confidence (Loui, 2006).

## Sustaining Teacher Motivation Through Interest and Passion in Southeast Asia

Bernasor et al. (2025) find that teachers in Southeast Asia strongly value interest and passion in keeping them motivated to stay in their profession (Mean = 5.09, SEM = 0.003). While Cambodia, Vietnam, and Brunei scored slightly below the regional average, teachers in these countries still rate passion as an important factor of motivation. Moreover, variation in responses differs across contexts. Teachers in Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines reported greater variability in how they perceive passion as a factor of their motivation to remain in teaching while a more homogenous view of interest and passion was noted in countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
**Mean Scores for the Motivational Factor "Teaching as Interest and Passion" across Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup>**

Country	Mean	Standard Error Mean (SEM)
<b>Southeast Asian Region</b>	5.09	0.003
<b>Indonesia</b>	5.44	0.007
<b>Malaysia</b>	5.41	0.027
<b>Lao PDR</b>	5.35	0.028
<b>Timor-Leste</b>	5.27	0.026
<b>Thailand</b>	5.27	0.011
<b>Philippines</b>	5.18	0.035
<b>Myanmar</b>	5.14	0.031
<b>Cambodia</b>	5.03	0.03
<b>Vietnam</b>	5.01	0.004
<b>Brunei</b>	4.82	0.021

<sup>1</sup>Bernasor et al. (2025) interpreted Likert scale values as: Strongly agree/ strongly satisfied (5.17–6.00), agree/ satisfied (4.34 – 5.16), somewhat agree/ somewhat satisfied (3.51 – 4.33), somewhat disagree/ somewhat satisfied (2.68 – 3.50), disagree/ dissatisfied (1.84 – 2.67), strongly disagree/ strongly dissatisfied (1.00 – 1.83).

Closely related to passion is interest, which is described as an interaction of an individual's inclinations, the activity which they are engaged in and the surrounding context. Such interaction creates positive emotions that enhances the individual's engagement (O'Keefe, Dweck, & Walton, 2018; Zee & Koomen, 2016, as cited in Almeida et al., 2021). Interest in teaching, along with other intrinsic motivators such as effort and personal efficacy, has emerged as an important dimension in assessing teacher motivation (Almeida et al., 2021).

However, while passion can strengthen teaching quality and improve learning outcomes, it does not guarantee retention. Excessive workload, weak leadership, and poor work-life balance may lead to burnout and declining motivation (Nwoko et al., 2025). Unchecked passion may also result in emotional exhaustion, which can negatively impact teachers' well-being and motivation (Fernet et al., 2014). Sustaining a healthy level of passion therefore requires supportive conditions such as reflective practice, research engagement, professional development, curriculum stability, peer support, and strong mentoring systems (Rampa, 2014; Santoro et al., 2012; Serin, 2023).

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Further analysis shows a strong positive association between teaching as interest and passion and teacher motivation ( $\rho = 0.40, p < .001$ ). Predictive results also identify interest and passion as a significant contributor in 6 out of 10 countries—Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Brunei (Bernasor et al., 2025). Notably, these countries reflect varying levels of motivation, ranging from the highest to the lowest in the region. It thus becomes critical to examine what sustains and strengthens teaching interest and passion as these insights may inform strategies to enhance motivation in contexts where teaching interest and passion remain low.

## Policy Options

Given the consistent contribution of interest and passion to teacher motivation across multiple Southeast Asian contexts, policies that actively support and sustain these dimensions warrant priority attention. For Ministries of Education (MOEs), strengthening teachers' interest and passion is not only a retention strategy but a long-term investment in education quality. The following policy options may provide a cogent starting point:



### 01 Provide Curriculum and Instructional Support.

Teachers are more likely to stay when they feel effective in their roles. Because curriculum implementation is crucial to their work, **teachers need adequate preparation, training, time and pedagogical support—especially amid ongoing reforms involving sustainable development, globalization, digital technologies and artificial intelligence.** Abrupt or unstable curricular changes can undermine teachers' sense of competence and reduce their motivation (Rampa, 2014). Constructive feedback and instructional support, meanwhile, can enhance their teaching practice and build confidence in effective curriculum implementation (Mireles-Rios & Becchio, 2018).



### 02 Cultivate Teachers' Love for Learners.

**Teachers' love for and commitment to learners can be strengthened when schools intentionally foster caring, respectful, and supportive environments.**

High-quality teacher-student relationships are marked by healthy relationships, positive affect, positive communication, and respect (Hamre et al., 2013). Clear guidelines on professional interaction, safeguarding policies, and structured mechanisms for addressing teacher-student concerns are therefore crucial to maintain an environment where students feel safe and are encouraged to learn.



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## 03

### Align Professional Development Opportunities

#### with Subject Area Expertise and Learner-Centered Approaches.

Interest in one's subject area plays a vital role in effective teaching and learning (Havia and Kaasila, 2024). While professional development often emphasizes pedagogy, teachers also need to deepen and update their knowledge considering new developments and emerging technologies. **Professional development opportunities should thus include sustained access to subject-focused training in order to nurture teachers' interest and at the same time, strengthen instructional quality.**

Additionally, teachers must be equipped to address students' socioemotional as well as academic needs. Professional development should therefore prioritize inclusive education, culturally-responsive pedagogy, and evidence-based classroom management. Strengthening these competencies enables teachers to build supportive learning environments that enhance student well-being, and allows them to focus on effective instruction. As teachers then observe improvements in their students, this can reinforce their sense of purpose, fulfillment, and sustained commitment to the profession. With growing emphasis on personalized learning, continuous teacher training both in socioemotional and subject-specific domains remains essential to nurturing—and potentially enhancing—teachers' interest and passion.



***Sustaining teachers' interest and passion goes beyond teacher retention – it is about safeguarding the quality of education for a diverse student population. Education ministries that treat teacher motivation as a core pillar of education policy may be better positioned to achieve future-ready learning systems and inclusive, sustainable societies.***

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