



## Unlearning and Relearning: A New Paradigm for Meaningful Indigenization of Educational Policies in Developing Nations

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

unlearning; rele transfer; indige policy impleme

**Objectives:** This systematic literature review examines how the concepts of 'unlearning and relearning' (Goodwin) can be reconceptualized as a new epistemological framework for the indigenization of educational policies in developing nations during the period 2000–2026, and how this framework can address the gap between global policy borrowing and meaningful local implementation. **Methods:** A systematic search was conducted across multiple databases (Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science) using keywords related to policy transfer, indigenization, unlearning, educational reform, and developing nations. The review synthesized 86 peer-reviewed sources published between 2000 and 2026, following PRISMA guidelines. Thematic analysis identified patterns in how developing countries conceptualize, implement, and adapt educational policies borrowed from global high-performing education systems. **Findings:** The literature reveals a critical paradox: while developing nations eagerly adopt policies from high-performing education systems (HPES), insiders within these systems consistently question their own effectiveness and doubt the transferability of their approaches. The concept of unlearning—strategic abandonment of ineffective policies regardless of their prestige—emerged as a crucial but underexplored dimension of meaningful policy indigenization. Three typologies of indigenization approaches were identified: (1) surface adaptation (cosmetic changes without substantive transformation), (2) systematic alignment (coherence across teacher education, curriculum, and classroom practice), and (3) epistemological reconstruction (redefining core educational values according to local contexts and knowledge systems). Developing nations in Southeast Asia demonstrated the greatest success when combining systematic alignment with epistemological reconstruction, supported by sustained political will and capacity building. **Conclusion:** The unlearning-relearning paradigm offers developing nations a theoretically grounded and empirically supported framework for moving beyond mere policy borrowing toward authentic indigenization. Rather than perpetually chasing international benchmarks, this approach enables countries to critically evaluate borrowed policies, abandon what proves ineffective in their context, and revitalize local knowledge systems in educational practices.



## INTRODUCTION

### Background and State of the Art

Educational policy transfer across national boundaries has become a defining feature of contemporary educational governance in developing nations (Brik, 2026). Since the early 2000s, the emergence of international comparative studies, particularly the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and rankings of high-performing education systems (HPES), has created powerful incentives for developing countries to adopt policies and practices from perceived "best practice" models. This phenomenon, termed the "Global Education Reform Movement" (GERM), represents a convergence around standardized approaches to curriculum, assessment, and teaching practices, often originating in OECD member nations or celebrated Asian systems.

The appeal of policy borrowing is understandable. Developing nations face immense challenges in improving educational quality with limited resources, and the promise of "proven models" offers a shortcut to reform (Asim et al., 2024; Siswanto Muhartono, 2024). However, the outcomes have been decidedly mixed. Numerous implementation studies reveal a persistent pattern: policies that appear successful in their original context often fail to produce similar results when transplanted to developing nation contexts (Saguin & Ramesh, 2026; Thapa et al., 2026). This "rhetoric-reality gap", the difference between what policy documents promise and what actually occurs in schools and classrooms, remains one of the most persistent challenges in comparative education (Koyama, 2009; Guthrie, 2018). Furthermore, research on the implementation of bilingual education and the localisation of curricula in diverse developing contexts reveals how context-specific factors fundamentally shape the appropriateness of policies (Benson, 2004; Lee et al., 2015).

A particularly troubling paradox has emerged from comparative education literature. Insider perspectives from HPES countries themselves reveal profound doubts about the applicability and sustainability of their own approaches (Lowe et al., 2021; Xaba, 2025). Educators and policymakers in celebrated systems, while officially showcasing success to international audiences, privately express concerns about narrowing curriculum, excessive testing, student mental health crises, and teacher attrition (Thorpe et al., 2025). These concerns resonate with critical indigenous education scholarship emphasizing how decontextualized educational policies can

undermine indigenous knowledge systems and pedagogical traditions (Delavan et al., 2024; Garcia et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2018). Developing nations are, in many cases, adopting policies that their source countries have begun to question or abandon.

This systematic literature review addresses this critical gap. Rather than continuing cycles of unreflective policy borrowing, we propose that developing nations embrace an "unlearning-relearning" paradigm, a theoretically grounded approach to policy indigenization rooted in decolonial scholarship (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2025; Martell & Mercereau, 2025) and the literature on indigenous knowledge systems (Huaman, 2025; Kgari-Masondo, 2025). This paradigm enables countries to: (1) critically evaluate borrowed policies through indigenous epistemologies (Ghanem et al., 2022); (2) strategically abandon approaches that prove ineffective in their context (Chender, 2025); and (3) revitalize and adapt local knowledge systems for educational improvement (Jacob et al., 2015; Lekoko & Modise, 2011; Yishak & Gumbo, 2014).

### **Research Gap and Urgency**

While the literature on policy transfer is extensive (Angelini, 2026; Koyama, 2009) and studies on educational reform in developing nations abound, the specific concept of "unlearning" as a strategic framework for policy indigenization remains underdeveloped. Recent scholarship on unlearning in organizational contexts (Amman & Mejia-Ramos, 2022; Durst et al., 2020; Jneid, 2024; Sharma & Lenka, 2019) has highlighted its potential, yet the comparative education literature has rarely engaged with this concept. Most policy transfer literature treats transfer as a one-directional process (adoption, adaptation, implementation) without addressing the critical phase of dis-adoption, the deliberate, strategic abandonment of borrowed policies when ineffective (Busch, 2024; Hermansen, 2024). Furthermore, indigenous education scholarship emphasizing pedagogical alternatives (Allison-Burbank et al., 2023; Garcia, 2021; Martin et al., 2017) remains marginalized within mainstream comparative education discourse.

The urgency of this research is amplified by several factors:

The Escalating Cost of Policy Failure: Developing nations continue to invest significant financial and human resources in educational reforms based on imported models (Lauwo et al., 2022; Wise et al., 2020) that frequently underdeliver. Teacher implementation studies reveal frustration and reduced pedagogical effectiveness when policies misalign with contextual realities (Dutta, 2019; Kalyanpur et al., 2022; Mullen, 2021). These resource-intensive failures divert investment from potentially more contextually appropriate alternatives (Zandvliet et al., 2023).

The Cognitive and Emotional Toll on Educators: Teachers in developing nations experience frustration and demoralization implementing borrowed policies that conflict with professional judgment and contextual knowledge (Hogarth, 2017; Riley et al., 2025). Research on teacher professionalism in the Global South reveals how decontextualized policies undermine educator agency and professional satisfaction (Kostogriz, 2012; Tikly et al., 2024). This emotional and cognitive burden undermines sustainable reform (Oladimeji, 2018).

The Erosion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems: The hegemonic position of globally circulating policy models has contributed to the devaluation and loss of indigenous pedagogical approaches (de Oliveira et al., 2026; Lewis & Stenlake, 2020). Knowledge systems developed over generations in response to local contexts, including Aboriginal pedagogies, African lifelong learning traditions, and Pacific Islander educational philosophies (Kayira, 2015; Lekoko & Modise, 2011; Milne et al., 2016), are systematized as "traditional" or "supplementary" rather than legitimate alternatives (Avoseh et al., 2012, 2014).

The Emerging Questioning from HPES Themselves: As insiders in celebrated systems increasingly voice doubts about sustainability and appropriateness (Lowe et al., 2021), there is a narrow window for developing nations to question before investing further (Hargis et al., 2024). Critical scholarship on trauma-informed decolonial practice (Marsh & Spencer, 2025) and reconciliation in education (Kennedy et al., 2019; Watts, 2024) suggests the limits of standardized, decontextualized reform.

## **Research Questions**

This systematic literature review addresses three interconnected research questions:

RQ1: Epistemological Framework. How can the concept of 'unlearning and relearning' be reconceptualized as a new epistemological framework within comparative education literature, and what theoretical resources from decolonial theory, organizational learning, and indigenous knowledge systems support its application to policy indigenization in developing nations?

RQ2: Typologies and Mechanisms. What frameworks in comparative education and policy studies literature describe processes of policy dis-adoption or strategic abandonment? What typologies of meaningful indigenization emerge from literature synthesis, and what mechanisms enable developing nations to move beyond surface-level adaptation toward epistemological reconstruction grounded in indigenous knowledge systems?

RQ3: Contextual Application. How do successful cases of policy indigenization in developing nations operationalize unlearning-relearning principles? What role do indigenous knowledge systems, teacher voice, and community engagement play? What adaptations are necessary for implementation in Indonesia's specific educational context?

## METHOD

### Research Design and Scope

This systematic literature review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The review synthesizes peer-reviewed literature published between 2000 and 2026, focusing on comparative education, policy transfer, educational reform in developing nations, indigenous knowledge systems, and decolonial education scholarship. Searches were conducted across databases: Scopus (multidisciplinary coverage). The research activities are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Stages of SLR Research

Stages	Activities
<b>Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria</b>	<b>Inclusion Criteria:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, or scholarly books</li><li>2) Published between January 2000 and December 2026</li><li>3) Written in English or available in English translation</li><li>4) Focus on educational policy transfer, reform, or implementation in developing nations</li><li>5) Discussion of adaptation, localization, indigenous knowledge, or effectiveness of transferred policies</li><li>6) Treatment of policy barriers, failures, modifications, or indigenous alternatives</li></ol> <b>Exclusion Criteria:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>7) Grey literature, unpublished theses, or unreviewed reports</li><li>8) Policy documents or white papers without original analytical content</li></ol>

Stages	Activities
	9) Studies exclusively on Western HPES without developing nation comparison 10) Opinion pieces without empirical or theoretical support 11) Studies published before 2000
<b>Screening and Selection Process</b>	12) Initial database searches yielded 247 unique records after deduplication. 13) Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts against inclusion criteria. 14) Full-text review of 112 potentially eligible articles resulted in 86 sources meeting all criteria. 15) Final corpus represents diverse geographic regions, methodological approaches, and theoretical orientations.
<b>Data Extraction and Analysis</b>	Data extracted from each source included: 16) Bibliographic information (authors, year, title, publication venue) 17) Geographic focus and research context 18) Type of educational policy examined (curriculum, assessment, teacher education, governance, etc.) 19) Theoretical frameworks employed (comparative education, organizational learning, indigenous studies, decolonial theory) 20) Key findings related to policy transfer, implementation, adaptation, indigenous knowledge, or policy dis-adoption 21) Discussion of barriers, failures, or indigenous/decolonial alternatives

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Finding 1

#### **The Paradox of Policy Borrowing, Insider Critique Reveals Limits of Celebrated Systems**

The literature consistently documents a paradox: while developing nations enthusiastically adopt policies from celebrated systems, insider scholars from those systems express profound doubt (Lowe et al., 2021; Xaba, 2025). Research on Aboriginal education in Australia (Thorpe et al., 2025) reveals how standardized Western approaches have marginalized Indigenous pedagogies and community knowledge. Similarly, scholarship on decolonial education (Marsh & Spencer, 2025;

Watts, 2024) demonstrates how imposing universal models undermines culturally specific educational purposes.

### **The Insider-Outsider Narrative Gap**

Research on learning and unlearning (Hermansen, 2024; Visser, 2017) reveals how systemic change requires deliberate abandonment of obsolete practices. In policy contexts, developing nations struggle because they have never engaged in this unlearning phase (Chender, 2025). Instead, they layer new policies onto existing systems without critically examining what should be abandoned (Busch, 2024). Research on policy implementation across diverse contexts (Guthrie, 2018; Koyama, 2009) repeatedly demonstrates this pattern.

Insider perspectives from celebrated systems reveal that these systems face fundamental challenges. Research on bilingual education reveals tensions between standardized assessment and authentic language development (Benson, 2004; Kalyanpur et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2015). Critical scholarship on teacher professionalism (Tikly et al., 2024) and the affective dimensions of teacher labour (Kostogriz, 2012) demonstrates how standardized policies undermine educators' agency. Yet developing nations continue to be emulated because outsider narratives, constructed by international organizations and media, omit these critical realities (Hogarth, 2017; Riley et al., 2025).

### **Finding 2**

#### **Three Typologies of Policy Indigenization—From Surface Adaptation to Epistemological Reconstruction**

The literature reveals that not all adaptations constitute meaningful indigenization. Three distinct typologies emerged, differentiated by depth of transformation and engagement with indigenous knowledge systems (Garcia et al., 2022; Shrestha & Khanal, 2016; Yishak & Gumbo, 2014):

##### **Type 1. Surface Adaptation**

This approach involves cosmetic or linguistic modifications without altering fundamental logic (Badar et al., 2018). Curricula are translated into local languages and recontextualized with local examples, yet underlying assumptions about knowledge, learning, and education remain unchanged (Ghanem et al., 2022). Research on the implementation of bilingual education reveals this pattern: programs adopted the structure but not the substance of multilingual pedagogies (Benson, 2004). This approach minimally impacts educational outcomes because it addresses form rather than substance.

Example cases: Multiple Southeast Asian nations adopted PISA-aligned curriculum frameworks with minimal modification (Asim et al., 2024; Lee et al.,

2015). Research in Nepal (Shrestha & Khanal, 2016) documented how decentralized systems adopted centralized policies without substantive localization (Thapa et al., 2026). Teacher implementation research reveals how decontextualized policies generate frustration (Dutta, 2019; Mullen, 2021).

### **Type 2. Systematic Alignment**

This approach involves coordinated modifications across multiple system elements: teacher education, curriculum, assessment, and classroom practice—to ensure coherence (Saguin & Ramesh, 2026). Rather than piecemeal adoption, this recognizes that policies operate within systems and that success requires alignment across elements (Wise et al., 2020). Research on policy capacity in decentralized contexts documents this necessity (Asim et al., 2024; Lauwo et al., 2022). Implementation research emphasizes how teacher professional development aligned with curriculum and assessment drives meaningful change (Fleming et al., 2017; Haßler et al., 2020).

Example cases: Research documents that sustained success occurs when policy changes are accompanied by complementary changes in teacher preparation, leadership development, and assessment systems, typically requiring 10-20 years (Siswanto Muhartono, 2024). Research on effective professional development interventions (Kaur et al., 2024; Staley et al., 2021) shows that systematic approaches yield better outcomes than fragmented adoption.

**Type 3. Epistemological Reconstruction.** This most ambitious approach fundamentally reconceptualizes educational goals and practices in light of local values, cultural frameworks, and indigenous knowledge systems. Rather than asking "How can we implement this policy more effectively?", this asks "What kind of education do we, as a community, believe serves our children and society best?" (Delavan et al., 2024; Garcia et al., 2022). Decolonial scholarship emphasizes this shift from borrowed to indigenous epistemologies (de Oliveira et al., 2026; Smith et al., 2018). Indigenous education research documents how centering indigenous pedagogies generates community ownership and sustainability (Allison-Burbank et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2017).

Example cases: Aboriginal community-based educators in Australia (Thorpe et al., 2025) engaged in epistemological reconstruction by centering indigenous knowledge systems and community involvement. Research in Ethiopia (Yishak & Gumbo, 2014) and New Zealand (Kennedy et al., 2019) documents how indigenous-led curriculum reconstruction generates deeper commitment and sustainable improvements. Studies on Hopi/Tewa pedagogies (Garcia, 2021) and Diné epistemologies (Allison-Burbank et al., 2023) reveal the educational effectiveness of indigenous approaches. However, such approaches often face resistance from actors invested in existing arrangements (Jacob et al., 2015).

Relationship to Unlearning: Each typology involves different levels of unlearning. Type 1 involves minimal unlearning—policies remain fundamentally unchanged. Type 2 involves strategic unlearning at the policy level but not at the epistemological level, acknowledging that borrowed policies don't fit and modifying them, while accepting underlying values. Type 3 involves comprehensive unlearning, explicitly rejecting foundational assumptions of borrowed policy regimes and reconstructing local epistemologies (Busch, 2024; Chender, 2025; Hermansen, 2024). Research on organizations successfully implementing deep change documents this multi-level unlearning requirement (Jneid, 2024; Sharma & Lenka, 2019).

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### **Finding 3**

#### **Context Determines Policy Appropriateness, Indigenous Knowledge Systems as Foundational Rather Than Supplementary**

Research on policy transfer consistently demonstrates that context profoundly determines policy appropriateness (Koyama, 2009; Saguin & Ramesh, 2026). Yet literature often treats context as a constraint or barrier rather than the primary determinant of effectiveness. Research on bilingual education reveals that linguistic context fundamentally shapes program success (Benson, 2004; Lee et al., 2015). Research on indigenous education demonstrates how culturally embedded pedagogies align with indigenous communities' understandings of knowledge and learning (Avoseh et al., 2014; Kayira, 2015; Lekoko & Modise, 2011).

#### **Factors Constituting "Context"**

1. Historical legacies of educational systems, colonial histories, and indigenous knowledge suppression
2. Political economy of governance (centralization vs. decentralization, state capacity, resource allocation)

3. Teacher and administrator beliefs, professional epistemologies, and educational philosophies
4. Student demographics, linguistic diversity, socioeconomic composition, and indigenous status
5. Economic constraints and resource availability
6. Cultural values regarding knowledge, learning, child development, personhood, and educational purposes
7. Power dynamics among stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents, indigenous communities, business interests)
8. Existing indigenous knowledge systems, pedagogical traditions, and community-based learning practices

Research on decentralized education systems reveals that policies designed for centralization often fail when decentralized (Asim et al., 2024; Thapa et al., 2026). Studies in Pakistan (Badar et al., 2018), Malawi (Shin et al., 2020), and Cameroon (Hargis et al., 2024) document how ignoring contextual factors (resource constraints, teacher training capacity, linguistic diversity, indigenous knowledge systems) predicts policy failure. Conversely, research documenting effective education in contexts that engaged with local knowledge systems reveals higher sustainability (Milne et al., 2016; Zandvliet et al., 2023).

#### **Finding 4**

#### **Unlearning as Deliberate Practice, Four Dimensions of Strategic Policy Disadoption**

Though underexplored in policy transfer literature, the concept of unlearning provides essential theoretical resources. Research on learning and unlearning reveals that true learning involves not just acquisition but also abandonment of outdated or ineffective knowledge (Amman & Mejia-Ramos, 2022; Visser, 2017). In policy contexts, unlearning refers to deliberate, effortful abandonment of previously held beliefs, practices, or policies (Durst et al., 2020; Sharma & Lenka, 2019).

#### **Four Dimensions of Unlearning in Policy Contexts**

##### **Cognitive unlearning**

Abandoning beliefs about what constitutes "good education" or "effective teaching" when challenged by local experience or evidence (Chender, 2025). This involves examining whether borrowed models align with community values and learner needs (Garcia et al., 2022). Research on mindset change in educators documents barriers to this cognitive shift (Lewis & Stenlake, 2020; Oladimeji, 2018).

##### **Institutional unlearning**

Dismantling structures, procedures, and systems established under previous policy regimes (Hermansen, 2024). This process faces resistance from actors

benefiting from existing arrangements (Busch, 2024). Studies on curriculum reform document how institutional structures embed particular epistemologies that resist change unless deliberately dismantled (Kennedy et al., 2019; Mullen, 2021).

### **Epistemological unlearning**

Questioning foundational assumptions about knowledge, learning, and the purposes of education embedded in borrowed frameworks (de Oliveira et al., 2026; Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2025). Decolonial scholarship emphasizes this as the deepest and most essential form of unlearning (Gutiérrez & Frías Epinayú, 2024; Smith et al., 2018). Indigenous education research documents how centering indigenous epistemologies requires unlearning Western epistemological hegemony (Delavan et al., 2024; Garcia, 2021).

### **Affective unlearning**

Overcoming emotional attachments and status anxieties associated with adopting prestigious, internationally-sanctioned approaches (Asha & Deshpande, 2025). Making unlearning feel like professional development rather than failure requires reframing (Marsh & Spencer, 2025; Riley et al., 2025). Research on trauma-informed approaches suggests how decolonial practice can support this emotional work (Watts, 2024).

## **Finding 5**

### **Indigenous Knowledge Systems, From Supplementary to Primary Frameworks**

Research extensively documents the educational potential of indigenous knowledge systems (Avoseh et al., 2014; Huaman, 2025; Kgari-Masondo, 2025; Lekoko & Modise, 2011; Martin et al., 2017). Yet comparative education often positions indigenous knowledge as "supplementary" or "culturally relevant content" within Western frameworks rather than as legitimate primary frameworks. Critical scholarship challenges this hierarchical epistemology (Garcia et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2018).

### **Characteristics of Indigenous Knowledge System Approaches**

#### **Situated and contextual**

Knowledge is embedded in specific local environments, relationships, and practices rather than abstract and universal. Research on lifewide and lifelong learning in African contexts (Kayira, 2015; Lekoko & Modise, 2011) documents how indigenous pedagogies are grounded in ecological and social relationships.

#### **Relational**

Learning emphasizes relationships among people, between humans and nature, and with ancestors/community heritage (Avoseh et al., 2012). Aboriginal pedagogy research emphasizes "country-based" learning (Kennedy et al., 2019; Thorpe et al., 2025). This relational orientation contrasts sharply with individual-competitive Western models.

### **Holistic**

Education addresses cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual, and physical dimensions rather than narrowly cognitive skills (Garcia, 2021; Martin et al., 2017). Research on Aboriginal education reveals how holistic approaches address trauma and promote wellbeing (Milne et al., 2016).

### **Community-embedded**

Learning occurs through participation in community practices, mentoring relationships, and cultural transmission rather than only formal classroom instruction (Jacob et al., 2015; Yishak & Gumbo, 2014). Research in Ethiopia documents how community-based education strengthens cultural continuity (Yishak & Gumbo, 2014). Pacific Island research emphasizes community responsibility for education (Lowe et al., 2024).

### **Adaptive and sustainable**

These systems have evolved over generations responding to local environmental, cultural, and social conditions. Unlike borrowed policies that may be abandoned after funding cycles, indigenous systems demonstrate sustainability (Ghanem et al., 2022; Zandvliet et al., 2023).

Rather than positioning indigenous knowledge as supplementary or culturally relevant content within Western frameworks, developing nations might consider indigenous knowledge systems as primary frameworks, with carefully selected elements of global best practices integrated where genuinely appropriate (Allison-Burbank et al., 2023; Garcia et al., 2022; Riley et al., 2025). This inversion from Western as primary with indigenous supplementary to indigenous as primary with global selectivity, represents the core of meaningful indigenization.

## **Finding 6**

### **Political Will and Sustained Commitment, The Temporal Dimension of Meaningful Reform**

Comparative case studies reveal that sustained political will and long-term commitment prove critical for successful reform. Research documents that meaningful educational transformation requires 10-20 years of consistent focus (Siswanto Muhartono, 2024; Wise et al., 2020). Sustainability research reveals that

reforms must survive political transitions and donor funding cycles (Lauwo et al., 2022; Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013).

Conversely, many developing nations undertake reform cycles lasting 3-5 years, typically aligned with election cycles or donor funding rather than evidence-based timelines for change (Hargis et al., 2024; Kaur et al., 2024). This temporal mismatch nearly guarantees implementation failure because educators cannot commit to policies likely to be abandoned or reversed (Thomas, 2023). Teacher research documents this dilemma (Persaud et al., 2025; Tunison & Amendt, 2026).

Political instability, competing policy initiatives, leadership changes, and resource constraints create environments where sustained implementation becomes nearly impossible (Asim et al., 2024; Brik, 2026). This suggests that policy indigenization, developing contextually appropriate approaches, may be more feasible and sustainable than attempting to transfer policies from systems with radically different political economies (Guthrie, 2018; Kostogriz, 2012). Research on self-determination and indigenous governance (Thomas, 2023) suggests that community-driven reform is more sustainable than externally imposed mandates.

### **Toward an Unlearning-Relearning Paradigm Grounded in Decolonial and Indigenous Scholarship**

The findings converge on a central insight: meaningful educational improvement in developing nations requires deliberate, strategic unlearning—abandoning ineffective borrowed policies and problematic assumptions about "good education"—coupled with relearning through critical engagement with local contexts, indigenous knowledge systems, and community expertise (Delavan et al., 2024; Garcia et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2018). This paradigm is grounded in decolonial scholarship (de Oliveira et al., 2026; Gutiérrez & Frías Epinayú, 2024; Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2025) that challenges epistemological colonialism in education.

### **Implications**

This review elevates "unlearning" as a core concept parallel to learning in comparative education theory. It challenges the assumption that improvement always involves adoption of newer approaches, drawing on organizational learning scholarship (Amman & Mejia-Ramos, 2022; Jneid, 2024; Sharma & Lenka, 2019; Visser, 2017) and decolonial theory (de Oliveira et al., 2026; Smith et al., 2018) to argue that sometimes improvement requires abandoning even prestigious policies and reconstructing locally-grounded approaches. The review contributes to indigenous education scholarship by elevating indigenous knowledge systems from supplementary to primary frameworks for educational improvement (Avoseh et al., 2014; Huaman, 2025; Martin et al., 2017).

### **Policy Implications**

For policymakers in developing nations, this paradigm suggests:

1. Conducting critical audits of existing policies to identify what should be abandoned (Chender, 2025; Hermansen, 2024), learning from research on dis-adoption in organizations (Durst et al., 2020)
2. Creating space for diverse stakeholder voices in policy deliberation, particularly indigenous communities, teachers, and parents, rather than privileging external consultants (Persaud et al., 2025; Riley et al., 2025)
3. Extending reform timeframes to realistic 10-20 year durations, given the educational system complexity (Siswanto Muhartono, 2024; Wise et al., 2020), resisting pressure for quick fixes (Haßler et al., 2020)
4. Investing in teacher professional development as a primary lever for improvement, incorporating professional judgment and contextual knowledge (Fleming et al., 2017; Richards et al., 2025; Tikly et al., 2024)
5. Positioning policy engagement as critical, asking "What can we learn from this AND what should we NOT do given our context?" rather than uncritical adoption (Garcia et al., 2022; Kennedy et al., 2019)

### **Research Implications**

This review identifies significant research gaps:

1. Limited research on policy dis-adoption and strategic abandonment in developing nations. This review calls for studies examining when and how countries successfully disengage from ineffective borrowed policies (Busch, 2024)
2. Underexplored potential of indigenous knowledge systems as primary educational frameworks, more ethnographic and comparative research is needed on how indigenous-led education functions (Allison-Burbank et al., 2023; Jacob et al., 2015)
3. Insufficient longitudinal studies tracking policy implementation over 10+ years, most evaluations occur too early to assess real transformation (Lauwo et al., 2022; Thomas, 2023)
4. Limited research centering teacher and community voices in policy transfer scholarship, more practitioner-engaged and participatory research needed (Marsh & Spencer, 2025; Mullen, 2021)

Scarce interdisciplinary research integrating comparative education, indigenous studies, and decolonial theory. This gap limits theoretical depth (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2018).

### **CONCLUSION**

The systematic literature review reveals that developing nations face a critical choice: continue in cycles of unreflective policy borrowing (Asim et al., 2024; Brik, 2026), or embrace the more challenging but ultimately more rewarding path of deliberate indigenization grounded in unlearning-relearning principles informed by

decolonial and indigenous scholarship (de Oliveira et al., 2026; Garcia et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2018).

The paradox is stark: while developing nations eagerly adopt policies from celebrated systems, insiders within those systems increasingly question the sustainability of their own approaches (Kennedy et al., 2019; Lowe et al., 2021; Xaba, 2025). This creates a window of opportunity to step back from chasing international rankings (Hargis et al., 2024) and ask fundamental questions: What kind of education do our children and communities need? What existing local and indigenous capacities can we build upon? What borrowed ideas genuinely serve our context, and what should we deliberately abandon (Garcia et al., 2022; Riley et al., 2025)?

The unlearning-relearning paradigm provides a theoretically grounded and empirically supported framework for navigating these questions. Rather than representing educational nationalism or retreat from global engagement, this approach involves sophisticated, critical engagement with international knowledge (Mullen, 2021; Persaud et al., 2025). Developing nations can selectively draw on global research while anchoring improvement in local contexts, values, and indigenous knowledge systems (Avoseh et al., 2014; Lekoko & Modise, 2011; Martin et al., 2017). This rebalancing, treating indigenous knowledge as primary and global knowledge as selectively useful, represents genuine educational sovereignty (Thomas, 2023; Tunison & Amendt, 2026).

For Indonesia and similar developing nations, implementation requires: (1) Political courage to question prestige models and make independent educational choices (Martell & Mercereau, 2025); (2) Temporal commitment sustaining reforms over 10-20 years despite political cycles (Wise et al., 2020); (3) Epistemic humility recognizing that Western educational science holds no monopoly on educational wisdom (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2025); (4) Teacher empowerment positioning educators as professionals and knowledge producers rather than implementers of external mandates (Lewis & Stenlake, 2020; Tikly et al., 2024); and (5) Community engagement, bringing indigenous and local voices into policymaking as full participants in knowledge generation (Huaman, 2025; Kgari-Masondo, 2025).

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