

Philosophical Foundations and the Development of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia: A Literature Reviews

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the philosophical foundations and development of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia, emphasizing its role in addressing contemporary educational challenges. The primary aim is to analyze and integrate philosophical principles to establish a theoretical framework connecting educational theory, policy, and practice. Employing a qualitative literature reviews methodology, this study draws on journals, books, and official documents to examine the curriculum's evolution and its alignment with key educational philosophies. The results reveal that the Merdeka Curriculum is built upon existentialism, humanism, progressivism, and constructivism, highlighting its focus on fostering individual autonomy, critical thinking, and meaningful learning experiences. It underscores the importance of aligning learning with students' needs, emphasizing competency development and character education. Additionally, the curriculum encourages innovative teaching practices and project-based learning to promote engagement and skill-building. In conclusion, the Merdeka Curriculum reflects a flexible and student-centered approach, preparing learners to navigate societal and global demands effectively. Its philosophical underpinnings provide a robust framework for addressing the complexities of modern education while fostering a holistic development of cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and physical competencies.

Keywords: *Merdeka Curriculum, Educational philosophy, Existentialism, Humanism, Curriculum development.*



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INTRODUCTION

Philosophy originates from the Greek terms 'phileo' (to love) and 'Sophia' (wisdom), collectively meaning "the love of wisdom." While this etymology provides insight into the essence of philosophy, it offers limited specificity, as many disciplines also pursue wisdom. Dewey (1916) and other scholars are often referred to as "philosophers of education" due to the significant role education plays in shaping broader philosophical ideas and theories. Educational philosophy fundamentally involves rational analysis of educational phenomena, aiming to understand the foundational principles of the educational process. It represents a high-level reflective process designed to address critical issues in educational theory and practice, encapsulated by the notion of "reflection for understanding" as a concise description of its purpose.

In this context, one expert remarked that philosophy "leaves things as they are", implying that philosophy clarifies the world without altering it. Similarly, the philosophy of education does not serve as a practical tool and cannot directly affect educational

practice. Instead, philosophical and pedagogical ideas manifest as structural paradigms. As part of applied philosophy, the philosophy of education is closely interconnected with pedagogy and educational practice (Vakhovskyi, 2023). This field intersects with three main branches of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, and axiology.

Education is a fundamental human need, and every individual is entitled to equal educational opportunities (Pristiwanti *et al.*, 2022). It is commonly defined as a lifelong endeavor to develop a person's potential, enabling them to function optimally and become educated individuals cognitively, affectively, and psychomotorically. Hanafi *et al.* (2018) emphasize education as a continuous process aimed at cultivating personal potential for optimal living and functioning. Education involves the systematic transmission of knowledge, skills, and values to nurture individuals into productive members of society who contribute to the advancement of their communities and nations. Although education is a gradual and complex process that yields delayed results, it represents a valuable long-term investment. Its success is realized when educated individuals contribute meaningfully to their fields and society (Junaedi *et al.*, 2021).

Philosophy plays a pivotal role as a foundational element in curriculum development. Beyond being the basis for curriculum formulation, philosophy contributes to shaping educational structures and objectives. Dewey (1916) regarded philosophy as a comprehensive theory of education, asserting that its primary aim is to define the goals and methodologies of educational institutions. According to Dewey, philosophy provides a universal framework for interpreting existence and addressing cognitive and ethical challenges in modern society. He emphasized that philosophy forms the foundational framework not only for schools but for all curriculum-related activities. This view is reinforced by his statement: "Education is the laboratory in which philosophical differences are revealed and tested".

The government's commitment to advancing national development through education is reflected in its efforts to increase the education budget, devise policies for quality enhancement, and tackle challenges across all educational levels, from primary to post-secondary (Pratiwi, 2019). This underscores the nation's resolve to enhance educational quality for global competitiveness. Education is intrinsically linked to the curriculum, which serves as a tool to achieve educational objectives. The curriculum is not merely a written document but a dynamic framework that guides educators in facilitating learning and achieving educational goals.

The curriculum embodies the philosophical principles underpinning education, outlining the desired educational outcomes. Although curriculum revisions are intended to enhance educational processes, frequent changes can create confusion and disrupt implementation. For instance, schools unprepared for the Merdeka Curriculum can continue using the 2013 Curriculum (K13). Meanwhile, the Merdeka Curriculum is an option for schools equipped for its application, such as driving schools (Suryani *et al.*, 2023). The development and implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum are guided by a philosophical framework that emphasizes existentialist principles, offering guidance in acquiring knowledge (Rahayu *et al.*, 2022). Existentialism provides concepts, analyses, and theories that serve as a foundation for educational practices.

The primary goal of this literature reviews is to identify, elaborate on, and integrate philosophical principles within education and curriculum to establish a theoretical framework that supports the analysis of the relationship between educational theory,

policy, and practice. This effort emphasizes the significance of philosophy as a foundation for understanding and shaping education to be adaptable to modern challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

2.1 Philosophy of Education

The philosophy of education serves as the cornerstone for curriculum development. To begin, it is essential to comprehend the primary purpose of education, as individuals inherently aspire to embody high moral character, reflecting ideals and social principles that align with communal existence. Education functions as the medium to achieve this aspiration, as it is a collective societal effort aimed at fostering individuals of moral excellence. The role of dreams and aspirations is evident in the educational philosophy underpinning modern education systems, positioning education as a critical issue that embodies ideals and values reflective of societal beliefs (Hamalik, 2017).

Philosophy and education deeply influence cultural structures and forms. Philosophy achieves this by anchoring every culture whether literate or not in an archetype of beliefs that provides meaning and significance to its adherents. Education, meanwhile, serves to formalize and convey these cultural beliefs through both symbols and training, cultivating philosophy into habitual attitudes, behaviors, and skills. While philosophy articulates cultural beliefs, education brings these beliefs to life.

Traditional Western philosophical perspectives on education include several defining characteristics: 1) Education is hierarchical and authoritarian; 2) The curriculum emphasizes subjects rather than processes; 3) Content is prioritized over the learning process; 4) Knowledge acquisition and precision are deemed crucial; 5) Rationality and reliance on factual evidence are emphasized; 6) Moral discernment, including the distinction between right and wrong, is essential; 7) Education should yield tangible outcomes or products; 8) These outcomes must be objectively assessed or measured; AND 9) Offering diverse curricula or schools is important to maximize individual strengths.

Traditionalists argue that the goal of education is to transmit cultural and factual knowledge to future generations, while progressives believe education should transform attitudes and beliefs to create a politically aware, socially conscious society. Progressives typically emphasize English, History, and Research due to their cultural relevance.

Educational essentialism is a framework asserting that children must master foundational subjects thoroughly and rigorously. Essentialist educators typically introduce students to simpler concepts before advancing to more complex skills. This paradigm is built on several core principles. First, immature students have a right to receive guidance from educated, compassionate, and cultured teachers. Second, an effective democracy relies on a democratic culture, where teachers instill societal ideals in each successive generation. Third, students are expected to engage in structured programs that demand accuracy, diligence, and excellence.

Moreover, essentialists advocate for teacher-centered classrooms, where instructors serve as intellectual and moral role models. Teachers and administrators determine the most critical aspects of learning, placing minimal emphasis on students' interests, particularly if they detract from the academic curriculum. In this approach, standardized test scores play a significant role in evaluating student progress. Pragmatism, in contrast,

rejects fixed educational goals or values, as these emerge dynamically through experience and are subject to change. For pragmatists, education is an adaptive and evolving process, focused on innovation, experimentation, and problem-solving. This philosophy embraces a naturalistic and exploratory approach to life and learning.

Constructivism emphasizes six guiding principles: 1) Students actively construct their knowledge; 2) They take ownership of their learning journey; 3) Teachers assist students in their learning processes; 4) The learning experience is prioritized over its outcomes; 5) Student participation is central to the curriculum; and 6) Teachers adopt a facilitative role.

In this view, educational institutions are seen as critical agents of societal improvement, with schools positioned as central social institutions. Perennialism, a 20th-century educational philosophy, emphasizes eternal and timeless values. Derived from the term "perennial," meaning everlasting, it emerged in response to progressive education's focus on continual innovation. Perennialism advocates for an idealized culture grounded in enduring principles and traditions. It prioritizes the development of the mind, rationality, and spiritual knowledge to instill immutable ideals. Perennialists argue that truth is eternal and unchanging (Kristiawan, 2016).

Existentialism highlights the uniqueness and autonomy of each individual, distinguishing them from groups or societies. It places the responsibility of life's meaning and self-identity squarely on the individual. In this framework, knowledge is inherently subjective, rooted in personal consciousness and experiences. Individuals acquire knowledge through encounters with both rational and irrational aspects of life, and its validity is determined by its relevance. Existentialist epistemology asserts that human experience is shaped by subjective, emotional, and rational elements. While pragmatists rely on scientific methods to resolve challenges, existentialists emphasize aesthetic, moral, emotional, and cognitive considerations when addressing life's difficulties. This divergence underscores the contrasting priorities of these two philosophies.

2.2 Curriculum Development

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has conducted extensive studies on curriculum redesign across various countries, consolidating effective concepts for systematic and accountable curriculum design. The OECD categorized these principles into four groups based on their areas of application: 1) In designing curricula or achievement standards for individual disciplines, three critical principles must be prioritized: focus, accuracy, and coherence; 2) When developing a curriculum that applies across disciplines, the principles of competence transfer, an interdisciplinary approach, and offering options are essential; 3) For broader curriculum policy design, authenticity, flexibility, and alignment are key principles; and 4) During the curriculum design process, engagement, student empowerment, and teacher empowerment should be emphasized. (Potrafke, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant learning losses not only in Indonesia but also globally. Many countries faced the adverse effects of school closures during this crisis (Piwko, 2021). To address the educational disruptions caused by COVID-19, governments worldwide have implemented policies to recover learning losses. Although each country tailors its regulations to local needs, these policies must consider the unique circumstances and demands of each context. Incorrect or poorly designed policies risk causing further harm to the education sector post-pandemic (Meliani *et al.*, 2021).

Curriculum development during the pandemic began with the introduction of an emergency curriculum, which simplified educational content to focus on essential competencies for students. Evaluations revealed that the emergency curriculum effectively reduced educational setbacks, particularly in improving literacy and numeracy skills (Arifin & Muslim, 2020). Subsequently, the independent curriculum was developed, emphasizing contextualized learning tailored to students' needs and developmental progress (Laga *et al.*, 2021).

To address the barriers and learning gaps exacerbated by the pandemic, as well as the challenges posed by shifts to online learning, the curriculum must undergo further simplification and refinement. A flexible curriculum that adapts to current conditions and demands has proven effective in enhancing student learning outcomes. However, successful curriculum implementation depends on the establishment of support structures that facilitate its execution (Susilawati, 2021; Sintiawati *et al.*, 2022). For teachers, the implementation of curriculum innovations is more manageable when the changes align with pre-existing practices. Significant shifts, however, may require additional implementation support to prevent teachers from becoming overwhelmed by the complexity of the changes. Key considerations in this process include: 1) Maintaining existing policies and best practices; 2) Providing diverse support mechanisms for implementing the curriculum; and 3) Ensuring a clear, coherent design that is easily understood by stakeholders, particularly teachers.

The success of educational reforms depends on attributes such as clarity, complexity, and the practicality of the innovations. A curriculum design that is straightforward and accessible, especially to teachers as primary stakeholders, is fundamental to achieving effective educational outcomes (Mulyana *et al.*, 2022).

METHODS

This study adopts a literature reviews approach, focusing on the philosophical foundations and the evolution of the curriculum in Indonesia. The study methodology relies on qualitative analysis of various references, including journals, books, and online resources, that are pertinent to findings from prior studies on the same topic.

The data collection process involved identifying and analyzing relevant literature, such as independent curriculum education policy guidelines, international and national journals, and related legislation (Vhalery *et al.*, 2022). The steps undertaken for gathering materials included: 1) Collecting data that aligns with the study topic; and 2) Analyzing the gathered materials and concluding the philosophical principles and the development of the independent curriculum. Furthermore, the study was conducted to ensure that the conclusions drawn are both accurate and reliable.

RESULTS

The Merdeka Curriculum is rooted in the ideology of Merdeka Belajar, which serves as a guiding principle for various educational programs outlined in the Ministry of Education and Culture's Strategic Plan for 2020–2024 (Permendikbud No. 22/2020) (Baharuddin,

2021). According to the Minister of Education and Culture, Merdeka Belajar promotes new perspectives in education, including innovative approaches to curriculum and learning. The same regulation states that the Merdeka Curriculum is designed to be flexible, competency-based, and adaptable to global demands while prioritizing character development and soft skills. Educators implementing the Merdeka Curriculum benefit from a strong understanding of learning theories to create effective teaching practices that address students' needs. Meaningful learning, which emphasizes connecting new concepts to students' prior knowledge and experiences, is central to this curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum underscores the importance of developing learning resources that are relevant to students' daily lives, fostering engagement and comprehension.

Competency development is a key focus of the Merdeka Curriculum, aiming to equip students with practical skills for the workplace and everyday life (Labola, 2019). It also places a strong emphasis on moral education, fostering students' character and ethics to ensure they grow into individuals with strong moral and ethical principles. Cooperative learning, which encourages collaboration and teamwork among students, aligns with the curriculum's objectives (Dewi & Maemonah, 2022). While these represent some theoretical foundations applied within the Merdeka Curriculum, other concepts can also support its development and implementation.

The Merdeka Curriculum is built upon philosophical and educational principles, including existentialism, which has been identified as one of its foundational philosophies (Rahayu *et al.*, 2022). Existentialism asserts that values do not exist independently of individuals, and humans should have the freedom to make choices and bear responsibility for their consequences. Within this framework, students are encouraged to make decisions about their education, fostering autonomy and personal growth. This philosophy prioritizes individual perspectives and emotions, enabling students to develop a deeper understanding of their responses to life circumstances.

Existentialist educators believe that education should primarily cater to individual meaning-making rather than impose predetermined programs. A curriculum inspired by existentialism focuses on themes that facilitate philosophical reflection and decision-making, while activities like self-expression and creative media encourage students to explore their feelings and insights. Teachers are seen as collaborators in this process, serving as facilitators and resources to help students find personal meaning rather than enforcing rigid ideals or interests. While existentialism provides flexibility, it has also found resonance with many modern educators, particularly in emphasizing individual needs and curriculum diversity. Learner autonomy, a central tenet of existentialism, aligns well with distance education principles, which have grown in importance with advancements in knowledge and technology.

The Merdeka Curriculum also incorporates philosophical principles from humanistic education, which emphasizes respecting and recognizing each learner's uniqueness and potential (Edwards *et al.*, 2017). By adopting a humanistic approach, the curriculum focuses on creating meaningful learning experiences that address students' needs and interests. Additionally, progressivism, a philosophy centered on student participation in knowledge construction, is integrated into the curriculum (Pinar, 2012). This approach fosters critical and creative thinking, empowering students to become agents of change. Constructivism, another foundational philosophy, emphasizes learners' active engagement with their environment to build understanding through exploration and reflection

(Grobman *et al.*, 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum draws on these philosophies to develop relevant and effective learning practices. Student-centered approaches, skill development, and meaningful learning are integral to its implementation. Key principles include aligning learning with students' achievement levels, enhancing literacy and numeracy skills, and strengthening the four pillars of education: cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and physical-aesthetic development (Chowdhury, 2016).

Teachers play a critical role in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum by identifying students' abilities, designing appropriate learning experiences, and incorporating engaging, project-based learning methods. Curriculum development must remain responsive to the evolving needs of students, society, and educational content. What is relevant in one context may not be universally applicable, and socio-economic developments often necessitate adjustments in school structures. The flexibility and adaptability of online education systems make them particularly suited to address these changes.

CONCLUSIONS

Every human being aspires to develop an admirable personality, and education functions as a pivotal tool in realizing these aspirations. As a collective effort, education aims to shape individuals into morally upright members of society. These goals and aspirations are embodied in the philosophy of education, which serves as the cornerstone of the educational system. The integration of educational philosophy into the creation of an independent curriculum, championed by the Father of Education, Ki Hajar Dewantara, forms a crucial foundation for establishing curriculum design principles and aligning them with philosophical perspectives from various educational theories. These include the philosophies of Existentialism, Humanism, Constructivism, and Progressivism. By blending these educational philosophies with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, the objective is to enhance the relevance of learning, better address students' needs, and provide them with practical skills to navigate future challenges. Furthermore, incorporating these philosophies enables institutions to deliver education that is not only engaging and meaningful but also values the individuality and unique talents of each student.

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