

Independent Learning from the Perspective of Educational Philosophy: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Phenomena in Education in Indonesia

Azra Fauzi¹, I Nyoman Tika², Wayan Suastra³, Ananta Wikrama Tungga Atmaja⁴

¹STKIP Harapan Bima

²³⁴Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha

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Abstract

The “Merdeka Belajar” policy represents Indonesia’s transformative effort to create a more flexible, humanistic, and competency-oriented educational ecosystem aligned with 21st-century demands. This article aims to analyze the philosophical foundations underpinning the policy and to evaluate its alignment with practical implementation in schools. Using a library research method, the study examines scholarly works, policy documents, and international educational reports. The findings reveal that Merdeka Belajar is grounded in progressivism, constructivism, humanism, existentialism, social reconstructionism, and the educational philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara. However, its implementation continues to face challenges, including teacher readiness, infrastructural limitations, digital inequality, and governance issues. The critical analysis highlights a persistent gap between the policy’s philosophical ideals and practical realities, indicating the need for strengthened teacher training, equitable resource distribution, and increased community involvement. The study concludes that the success of Merdeka Belajar depends not only on curriculum design but also on collective commitment among educational stakeholders to ensure a liberating, inclusive, and future-relevant learning environment.

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Corresponding Author:

Azra Fauzi,

S3 Ilmu Pendidikan

fauziazral@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesian education is undergoing a major transformation through the Merdeka Belajar policy launched in 2019 in response to contemporary challenges, including low literacy and numeracy outcomes, disparities in quality across regions, and demands for 21st-century competencies. This reform brings a paradigm shift in education that focuses not only on technical aspects but also on a philosophical renewal that places freedom, creativity, and independence at the core of the educational process [1]. Through this policy, the government encourages the creation of a learning environment that is more adaptive, relevant, and in line with the dynamics of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era.

The Independent Curriculum is a form of policy implementation that emphasizes learning flexibility, core competency development, critical thinking skills, and project-based learning. This curriculum provides teachers with the freedom to tailor learning experiences to student characteristics, in line with the philosophy of progressivism and the values of Ki Hajar Dewantara, which emphasize the independence and meaningfulness of education [2], [3]. However, Indonesia's literacy achievements in international studies such

as PISA still show fundamental problems that require more contextual and innovative pedagogical strategies [4], [5].

In addition to literacy challenges, the gap in access to education between urban and rural areas remains an unresolved issue. Educational infrastructure, particularly access to technology and learning resources, is not evenly distributed across Indonesia. This situation has resulted in uneven implementation of the Independent Learning program and varying levels of learning practices in each region [6], [7]. This gap demonstrates that sound policies require the support of a strong education ecosystem to be implemented optimally.

Philosophically, Freedom to Learn is rooted in various schools of thought, such as progressivism, constructivism, humanism, existentialism, and social reconstructionism. Progressivism encourages experiential learning; constructivism emphasizes the active construction of knowledge by students; humanism emphasizes holistic personal development; existentialism emphasizes freedom and responsibility in learning; and social reconstructionism views education as a tool for social change.[8], [9], [10], [11]The integration of these various philosophies provides a strong foundation for the formation of independent, critical, and character-based students.

However, the implementation of Merdeka Belajar also faces practical and philosophical challenges on the ground. Teacher unpreparedness, limited facilities, low digital literacy, and differences in school capacity are factors that hinder the achievement of this policy's ideal goals.[12], [13], [14]Parental involvement and support for educational governance are also important aspects that need to be strengthened. Therefore, a philosophical study is crucial to assess the extent to which this policy aligns with national education goals, as well as how the gap between concept and practice can be bridged so that Freedom to Learn truly produces an intelligent, creative, and competitive generation.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with library research to analyze the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) phenomenon from the perspective of educational philosophy. The primary data sources come from policy documents, indexed national and international journal articles, reports from educational organizations such as the OECD, and conceptual writings on progressivism, constructivism, humanism, existentialism, social reconstructionism, and the thoughts of Ki Hajar Dewantara relevant to the context of Merdeka Belajar. The data collection process was carried out by selecting relevant literature from the most recent period to obtain a comprehensive picture of the philosophical foundations and challenges of implementing the policy. All data were analyzed thematically, with a focus on patterns of philosophical thought and their relationship to the reality of Indonesian education.

Data analysis was conducted in three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In data reduction, researchers identified core concepts emerging from the literature, such as the characteristics of progressivism, the role of constructivism in independent learning, and the relevance of humanism in holistic student development. Next, in the data presentation stage, the analysis results were compiled into a systematic description that connects philosophical theory with empirical findings regarding the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in various school contexts. The final stage was conclusion drawing, in which researchers evaluated the alignment between educational philosophy and the implementation practices of Independent Learning, while also identifying contemporary challenges and their implications for the development of education policy in Indonesia.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION (12 Pt)

3.1. Philosophical Foundation of Independent Learning

The Independent Learning Policy is formulated on a diverse philosophical foundation, integrating Western and Eastern educational thought to create a more humanistic, creative, and holistic education. Historically, this policy is a response to the demands of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, which requires students to possess critical thinking skills, creativity, and independent learning abilities.[11] Therefore, educational transformation is not merely an administrative change, but a paradigm shift based on progressive, constructivist, humanist, existentialist, and reconstructionist educational philosophies.

a. Progressivism as the Basis for Renewal

Progressivism is the most prominent foundation of the Merdeka Belajar policy. This philosophy, popularized by John Dewey, emphasizes student-centered learning and the social relevance of education. This policy encourages schools and teachers to adapt learning to students' characteristics, needs, and interests to optimally develop their potential.[11]. Thus, Merdeka Belajar seeks to shift education from rigid instructional patterns to more interactive, flexible, and contextual learning experiences.

b. Constructivism and Self-Directed Learning

Constructivism emphasizes that knowledge is not simply transmitted, but constructed through experience and interaction. This principle is at the heart of the Independent Curriculum, particularly in project-based learning, authentic assessment, and differentiated learning. Students are given space to explore, ask questions, and discover knowledge independently [15]. Teachers shift their role from lecturers to facilitators, guiding the discovery and development of students' potential.

c. Humanism and Holistic Education

Humanism directs education towards holistic personal development, including emotional, moral, social, and spiritual aspects. Independent Learning reflects humanist values by paying attention to freedom of thought, respect for individual differences, and strengthening students' character [15], [16]. This policy emphasizes that the goal of education is not just knowledge, but the formation of empathetic, critical, and socially responsible individuals.[17].

d. Educational Anthropology and Local Context

Anthropological philosophy emphasizes the importance of cultural context in education. Freedom to Learn opens up opportunities for curriculum adaptation to align with Indonesia's cultural diversity. This allows schools to integrate local values into learning, such as regional culture, local language, or other local wisdom [15].

e. Ki Hajar Dewantara's Philosophy as a National Foundation

As a central figure in Indonesian education, Ki Hajar Dewantara emphasized "freedom to learn" rooted in national culture, character development, and respect for children's nature. The values of *ing ngarsa sung tuladha, ing madya mangukarsa, tut wuri handayani* are clearly reflected in the Merdeka Belajar orientation. This philosophy emphasizes that students must develop into independent individuals capable of standing on their own culture [15], [16].

f. Philosophical Critique of Independent Learning

Although philosophically rich, some critics believe that an unbalanced policy orientation toward job readiness and skills market risk can neglect the importance

of moral, ethical, and social justice education [18]. This serves as a reminder that educational transformation must remain grounded in humanitarian values.

3.2. Contemporary Phenomena in Indonesia and Their Impact on the Implementation of Independent Learning

The implementation of the Independent Learning policy is heavily influenced by the current realities of Indonesian education. Three major phenomena influencing its implementation are: (1) literacy challenges, (2) socio-economic disparities, and (3) the digitalization of education.

a. National Literacy Challenge

Indonesia's declining PISA reading literacy scores indicate fundamental problems in students' comprehension abilities [19]. The Independent Curriculum addresses this through project-based learning, a contextual approach, and the integration of literacy across all subjects [20]. However, limited teacher training and facilities mean its implementation is not uniform. [21], [22].

b. Socioeconomic Disparities and Access to Education

The gap between urban and rural areas remains a major obstacle to equalizing the quality of education. Schools in underdeveloped areas often lack facilities, internet access, and human resources [23], [24]. As a result, policies that demand independent learning are often difficult to implement optimally. Equitable distribution of educational infrastructure is an absolute requirement for the success of this transformation.

c. Digitalization of Education and the Technology Gap

Digitalization is a crucial component of Independent Learning, especially post-COVID-19 pandemic. While technology can expand access and enrich learning, the digital divide remains a serious issue [24]. Not all teachers and students have adequate digital literacy, and many schools face limited devices. [21], [22] This requires more comprehensive policies to strengthen schools' digital capacity.

3.3. Philosophical and Practical Challenges of Implementing Independent Learning

a. Teacher Readiness and Training

One of the main obstacles is teachers' unpreparedness in understanding and implementing the principles of the Independent Curriculum. Uneven training leads to large variations in the quality of implementation [25]. Teachers also struggle to design authentic assessments and differentiated learning [26].

b. Infrastructure and Resource Limitations

Many schools, especially in remote areas, do not yet have adequate learning support facilities, such as suitable classrooms, digital devices, and teaching materials. [12], [27] Budget constraints further exacerbate policy implementation (Tobondo & Tondowala, 2023).

c. Governance and Policy Issues

Lack of coordination between central and regional governments, limited fund allocation, and governance issues impact the effectiveness of policies. [28]. Furthermore, collaboration with industry partners to support vocational learning is not yet optimal.

d. Student and Parent Involvement

Implementing student-centered learning requires active student participation and family support. However, not all parents understand or support this new learning system. [29], [30] This hinders the creation of an ideal learning ecosystem.

e. Assessment and Evaluation of Learning

The lack of clarity in the formulation of learning outcomes (CP) and learning objective flow (ATP) makes it difficult for teachers to determine appropriate assessment strategies [27]. This is even though assessment is an important component of holistic learning in the Independent Curriculum.

3.4.A Critical Analysis of the Congruence of Philosophy and Practice

Ideologically, Freedom to Learn reflects progressive and humanistic education. However, its implementation on the ground demonstrates a gap between philosophical ideals and practical realities. Philosophically, this policy encourages freedom of thought, creativity, and character development. However, in practice, limitations in human resources, infrastructure, digital literacy, and governance capacity make it difficult for some schools to achieve these ideal standards.

Overall, the results and discussion indicate that the Freedom to Learn policy has a strong philosophical foundation, but its implementation faces significant challenges stemming from gaps in infrastructure, teacher capacity, digital literacy, and the complexity of education governance. Philosophical analysis reveals that the principles of progressivism, constructivism, humanism, and the thoughts of Ki Hajar Dewantara have provided a clear direction for educational transformation, but the reality on the ground has not fully reflected these ideal values.

These findings underscore the importance of synchronizing educational philosophy and implementation practices through more comprehensive policies, improved teacher training, equitable resource allocation, and strengthening the role of the community in supporting independent and meaningful learning. Thus, Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) still holds great potential, but its success depends heavily on the ability of the education ecosystem to bridge the gap between concept and practice.

4. CONCLUSION

The Freedom to Learn policy is a transformative step in Indonesian education, grounded in a strong philosophical foundation encompassing progressivism, constructivism, humanism, existentialism, social reconstructionism, and the educational values of Ki Hajar Dewantara. This paradigm positions students as active subjects in the learning process, to develop individuals who are independent, creative, and have character, and who are adaptive to the dynamics of 21st-century life. From a philosophical perspective, Freedom to Learn has provided a clearer direction for holistic education that values diversity, freedom of thought, and independent learning.

However, the implementation of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) is not without significant challenges. Contemporary phenomena such as low literacy rates, socioeconomic disparities, and the digitalization of education are inhibiting factors affecting the equitable quality of implementation. Teacher unpreparedness, diverse school capacities, limited infrastructure, and a lack of understanding of curriculum philosophy contribute to the mismatch between ideal concepts and field practice. Challenges in educational governance, minimal family support, and the complexity of assessment models further exacerbate this gap.

Nevertheless, this policy still holds significant potential to create a relevant, adaptive, and sustainable education ecosystem. Improvement efforts through teacher training, equitable infrastructure, strengthened governance, enhanced collaboration with the community, and alignment of the curriculum with moral and ethical values are key to the successful implementation of Freedom to Learn. Strengthening the philosophical

dimension is also necessary to ensure that education does not become trapped in a purely pragmatic orientation but remains grounded in the noble goal of developing a holistic Indonesian.

Overall, Merdeka Belajar represents a grand vision for building a liberating and emancipating education system. The success of this vision depends on the shared commitment of all stakeholders to bridge the gap between philosophy and practice, so that Indonesian education can develop to be more inclusive, competitive, and oriented towards national progress.

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