

From Policy to Classroom Reality: Progressivism in the Merdeka Curriculum at Indonesian Primary Schools

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Abstrak: Studi ini secara kritis meneliti implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di sekolah dasar Indonesia melalui lensa filosofi pendidikan progresif, dengan perhatian khusus pada realisasi pembelajaran berpusat pada siswa dalam praktik kelas. Dengan menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif, studi ini mengumpulkan data dari sepuluh video pembelajaran di kelas, sepuluh dokumen modul pengajaran, dan kuesioner yang diberikan kepada guru dengan pengalaman mengajar mulai dari 5 hingga 20 tahun. Data dianalisis secara tematik dengan mengidentifikasi pola yang berkaitan dengan otonomi siswa, interaksi di kelas, dan keseimbangan peran guru-siswa. Temuan menunjukkan adanya perbedaan yang mencolok antara niat kebijakan dan realitas di kelas. Meskipun guru menunjukkan pemahaman konseptual tentang prinsip-prinsip progresif dan secara formal mengintegrasikan langkah-langkah berpusat pada siswa ke dalam rencana pembelajaran, praktik kelas yang sebenarnya tetap didominasi oleh guru. Siswa diberi kesempatan terbatas untuk terlibat dalam penyelidikan, diskusi, dan refleksi yang bermakna, sementara guru terus mengendalikan proses pembelajaran dengan memberikan penjelasan yang panjang lebar dan mengarahkan siswa ke jawaban yang telah ditentukan sebelumnya. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai progresif yang tertanam dalam Kurikulum Merdeka telah diimplementasikan pada tingkat prosedural, bukan filosofis. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa tanpa keterlibatan filosofis yang lebih dalam dan pengembangan profesional yang berkelanjutan, reformasi kurikulum berisiko menjadi perubahan simbolis yang gagal mengubah budaya kelas.

Kata kunci: Kurikulum Merdeka, progresivisme, pembelajaran berpusat pada siswa, sekolah dasar, praktik kelas

Abstract: This study critically examines the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian primary schools through the lens of progressivist educational philosophy, with particular attention to the realization of student-centered learning in classroom practice. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, the study collected data from ten classroom learning videos, ten teaching module documents, and questionnaires administered to teachers with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 20 years. Data were analyzed thematically by identifying patterns related to student autonomy, classroom interaction, and the balance of teacher-student roles. The findings reveal a noticeable discrepancy between policy intentions and classroom realities. Although teachers demonstrated conceptual understanding of progressivist principles and formally integrated student-centered steps into lesson plans, actual classroom practices remained predominantly teacher-dominated. Students were provided limited opportunities to engage in meaningful inquiry, discussion, and reflection, while teachers continued to control the learning process by delivering extensive explanations and directing students toward predetermined answers. This indicates that progressivist values embedded in the Merdeka Curriculum have been implemented at a procedural rather than a philosophical level. The study concludes that without deeper philosophical engagement and sustained professional development, curriculum reform risks becoming a symbolic change that fails to transform classroom culture.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, progressivism, student-centered learning, primary education, classroom practice

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INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum has been officially introduced as Indonesia's major educational reform aimed at transforming classroom practices from rigid, content-driven instruction toward more flexible, student-centered learning environments. This curriculum emphasizes learner autonomy, differentiated instruction, and contextual project-based learning as core principles intended to empower students as active constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients of information (Kemendikbud saintek, 2022; Sari & Nugroho, 2023). In primary education, these principles are particularly critical because early learning experiences shape children's cognitive, social, and moral development. However, despite the progressive ideals embedded in policy documents, emerging studies suggest that many Indonesian elementary classrooms continue to rely on traditional teacher-centered practices, raising questions about the extent to which the philosophical foundations of the Merdeka Curriculum are realized in everyday teaching (Putri et al., 2024; Wulandari & Hamzah, 2022).

Progressivism, as articulated by John Dewey and later educational philosophers, places learning within lived experience, emphasizing inquiry, reflection, and democratic participation in the classroom. Contemporary interpretations of progressivist education reaffirm that student-centered learning is not merely a pedagogical strategy but a philosophical stance that recognizes learners as meaning-makers who engage with real-world problems (Biesta, 2021; Zhao, 2023). In primary school contexts, progressivism is manifested through practices such as project-based learning, collaborative inquiry, formative assessment, and opportunities for students to exercise agency over their learning processes. International studies in the past five years have shown that schools that adopt authentic progressivist approaches demonstrate improved student motivation, deeper conceptual understanding, and stronger social engagement (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023).

Within the Indonesian context, the Merdeka Curriculum explicitly reflects these progressivist ideas through its flexible structure, reduced content load, and emphasis on differentiated learning pathways. The policy encourages teachers to design learning experiences that respond to students' interests, abilities, and local contexts, while assessment is framed as formative and diagnostic rather than solely summative (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Recent analyses of curriculum documents have confirmed that the Merdeka Curriculum aligns conceptually with global trends in learner-centered education and competency-based frameworks (Suyanto & Widodo, 2023; Yuliani et al., 2024). At the level of discourse, Indonesia appears to have embraced a progressive vision of schooling that resonates with both international educational reforms and national aspirations for holistic human development.

Nevertheless, policy aspirations do not automatically translate into classroom realities. Empirical research conducted in Indonesian primary schools over the past five years indicates a persistent gap between curriculum ideals and instructional practices. Studies by Wulandari and Hamzah (2022) and Putri et al. (2024) reveal that many elementary teachers still prioritize teacher-based instruction, textbook dependency, and teacher-controlled classroom interactions, even when implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. This pattern is not unique to Indonesia; global research on curriculum reform consistently reports that teachers tend to reproduce familiar pedagogies unless supported by sustained professional development and philosophical understanding of reform goals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Zhao, 2023). As a result, student-centered learning often becomes a rhetorical label rather than an authentic classroom reality.

The persistence of teacher-centered practices is particularly concerning in the context of primary education, where children's learning dispositions are formed. Research suggests that when students are denied meaningful opportunities to explore, question, and collaborate, they are less likely to develop critical thinking and intrinsic motivation—key outcomes envisioned by progressivist education (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2021; Biesta, 2021). In Indonesian SD classrooms, the challenge is compounded by systemic issues such as limited teacher training on differentiated instruction, large class sizes, and assessment cultures that continue to privilege standardized testing over formative feedback (Yuliani et al., 2024; Sari & Nugroho, 2023). These constraints highlight the need to examine not only what the Merdeka Curriculum prescribes, but also how teachers interpret and enact its principles in daily practice.

From the perspective of Philosophy of Islamic Education, this issue carries additional significance. Islamic educational thought emphasizes holistic human development (*insānkāmil*), moral cultivation, and the nurturing of students' innate potential (*fitrah*), values that resonate strongly with progressivist ideals of learner agency and experiential learning. Recent scholarship has argued that progressive pedagogy, when contextualized within Islamic educational frameworks, can strengthen character education and promote meaningful engagement with knowledge (Azra, 2021; Rahman & Nata, 2022). However, without philosophical clarity, teachers may treat the Merdeka Curriculum as a technical mandate rather than as a transformative vision grounded in educational values.

In light of these considerations, this study seeks to critically examine the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian primary schools from a progressivist perspective, with particular attention to the extent to which student-centered learning is realized in classroom practices.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore how progressivist principles, particularly student-centered learning, are enacted in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesian primary schools. Data were collected through

three main techniques: classroom learning video observation, document analysis of teaching modules, and questionnaires distributed to elementary school teachers.

The research sample consisted of ten classroom learning videos, each with a duration of approximately 70 minutes, ten teaching module documents, and questionnaire responses from teachers with varying teaching experiences of 5, 10, 15, and 20 years. The inclusion of teachers with different lengths of teaching experience was designed to reflect the diversity of pedagogical backgrounds in Indonesian primary schools. Teachers who are relatively new to the profession are generally more familiar with recent curriculum reforms and contemporary student-centered approaches, while more experienced teachers tend to rely on long-established instructional practices. By involving teachers across these experience levels, this study was able to explore how teaching experience shapes teachers' responses to the Merdeka Curriculum and influences the extent to which progressivist principles are enacted in classroom practice. These varied data sources were used to triangulate findings and provide a comprehensive picture of classroom practices. The observation focused on identifying indicators of student-centered learning, including student autonomy, interaction patterns, and opportunities for inquiry and reflection.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. All data from classroom videos, teaching modules, and questionnaires were coded based on progressivist indicators, including student autonomy, interaction patterns, opportunities for inquiry, and the dominance of teacher talk. These codes were then categorized into broader themes to identify consistencies and discrepancies between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual classroom practices. Triangulation across data sources was applied to enhance the credibility of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings derived from three research instruments: classroom video observations, teaching module document analysis, and teacher questionnaires. The analysis focuses on how far progressivist principles—particularly student-centered learning are realized in classroom practices under the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

Findings from Teaching Module Analysis

The analysis of ten teaching modules indicates that teachers have formally integrated student-centered learning principles into their lesson plans. Most modules explicitly included activities such as observing instructional videos, engaging in group discussions, completing project-based tasks, and presenting group work in front of the class. These instructional steps align with the curriculum's emphasis on joyful, meaningful, and mindful learning. This finding supports previous studies which argue that the Merdeka Curriculum provides strong conceptual guidance for student-centered pedagogy and learner autonomy (Sari & Nugroho, 2023; Yuliani et al., 2024).

However, a closer examination of the modules reveals that these activities were largely procedural and descriptive, with limited explanation of how students were expected to construct knowledge, pose questions, or reflect on learning. This finding suggests that although teachers are able to reproduce the terminology of progressivist pedagogy, they may not yet fully grasp its philosophical depth, a challenge also reported by Suyanto and Widodo (2023).

Findings from Classroom Video Observations

Contrary to the optimistic depiction found in the teaching modules, classroom video observations reveal that instructional practices remain predominantly teacher-centered. In all observed lessons, teachers controlled the majority of classroom discourse, providing extended explanations and directing students toward predetermined answers. Student participation was limited to short segments, particularly during observation and discussion phases, and only a small group of students consistently engaged in classroom interaction.

This pattern resonates with Wulandari and Hamzah's (2022) findings that Indonesian primary classrooms are still dominated by traditional instructional modes despite the introduction of progressive curriculum reforms. From a progressivist perspective, this contradicts Dewey's principle of democratic classrooms, where learners are expected to actively participate in inquiry and meaning-making processes (Biesta, 2021; Zhao, 2023).

Findings from Teacher Questionnaires

The questionnaire results show that all participating teachers reported having attended in-house training or deep learning workshops related to the Merdeka Curriculum. They also claimed to have implemented joyful, meaningful, and mindful learning approaches. Nevertheless, they simultaneously acknowledged that they remained the dominant speakers in their classrooms.

This discrepancy between teachers' perceptions and observed practices reflects what Darling-Hammond et al. (2023) describe as the "implementation gap" in curriculum reform, in which teachers adopt the language of reform without fully transforming their classroom culture. The persistence of teacher-dominated instruction suggests that professional development programs may focus more on technical procedures than on the philosophical foundations of progressivist education.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate a misalignment between curriculum intentions and classroom realities. While teaching modules and teacher self-reports indicate strong alignment with progressivist ideals, classroom observations reveal limited enactment of student-centered learning. This inconsistency supports previous research asserting that educational reform is unlikely to succeed without addressing teachers' beliefs, values, and instructional identities (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2021; Putri et al., 2024). Therefore, the findings suggest that the Merdeka Curriculum is currently implemented at a symbolic rather than transformative level in Indonesian primary schools.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that although the Merdeka Curriculum is philosophically grounded in progressivist ideals, its implementation in Indonesian primary classrooms remains largely teacher-centered. Teachers continue to dominate instructional processes through extensive explanations and tightly controlled activities, thereby limiting students' opportunities to engage in critical thinking, inquiry, and autonomous learning. The findings indicate that progressivist principles are more visible in lesson documentation than in actual classroom interaction.

Furthermore, while teachers demonstrate awareness of student-centered learning models such as PjBL and PBL, this understanding has not yet translated into meaningful pedagogical transformation. This study underscores the importance of strengthening philosophical literacy among teachers so that curriculum reform is not reduced to a technical exercise but becomes a reflective and value-driven practice. Future professional development should therefore emphasize not only instructional strategies but also the philosophical foundations of progressivism to foster sustainable change in primary education classrooms.

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