

Merdeka Curriculum: The Revival of Post-war Indonesian Educational Thought

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Abstract

The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced in 2022, was developed to address the learning loss experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and to improve upon the previous curriculum, which failed to significantly enhance Indonesian students' educational achievements. Officially adopted as the National Curriculum in 2024, it draws inspiration from educational figures like Ki Hajar Dewantara, particularly his concept of *Manusia Merdeka* (independent individuals) used in post-war Indonesian education. This research examines how post-war Indonesian educational thought has been contextualized and integrated into the Merdeka Curriculum, enriching its philosophical foundation and spirit. The findings suggest that the Merdeka Curriculum effectively revitalizes post-war educational philosophies, impacting educational theory, culture, teacher roles, and student competencies, while also incorporating contemporary developments. However, differences between the Merdeka Curriculum and post-war educational thought exist, particularly in the areas of spirituality and the educational environment. Further study in these areas could strengthen the curriculum's foundation and help achieve national educational goals. A significant challenge moving forward is the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum across various educational institutions. Ensuring sustainable and consistent application of this policy amidst potential political changes in Indonesia remains a critical concern. The success of the Merdeka Curriculum will depend on its ability to adapt and be maintained within the evolving political landscape.

Keywords: Education, Merdeka Curriculum, Post-war Educational Thought

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Introduction

"The fruit of education is the maturation of the soul, which will enable the realization of an orderly and pure life and livelihood that benefits others."

- Ki Hajar Dewantara, 1942

In March 2024, Indonesia's Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Nadiem Makarim, issued Ministerial Regulation (Permendikbudristek) Number 12 of 2024, which established the Merdeka Curriculum (Independent Curriculum) as the national curriculum starting from the 2024/2025 academic year. The Merdeka Curriculum, previously known as the prototype or emergency curriculum, was created to enhance the 2013 Curriculum and as a response to the learning loss experienced during the pandemic covid-19 (Mulyasa, 2023). The curriculum is envisioned to provide more freedom (independence) for the development of students' character and competencies, especially at the primary and secondary education levels, allowing students to pursue their interests more flexibly. This is crucial because COVID-19 has weakened many aspects, including education (Bao, 2020; Kurniawan et al., 2020). Among the impacts are decreased motivation and self-confidence among students, as well as teachers' confusion in meeting learning outcomes amid existing restrictions.

The Merdeka Curriculum is claimed to be inspired by the thoughts of the Father of Indonesian Education, Ki Hajar Dewantara (KHD) (Efendi et al, 2023; Wardhana et al, 2020). Previously, KHD's ideas also served as the foundation for Indonesia's post-war education policies. Permendikbudristek Number 12 of 2024 also mentions that, in addition to being based on the ideals of independence and the philosophy of Pancasila, the Merdeka Curriculum is founded on KHD's framework of thought, particularly related to the concept of developing independent individuals. This means individuals who, both physically and mentally, do not depend on others but rely on their strength. Therefore, the learning process is directed towards liberating, building independence, and sovereignty in students, while still recognizing the authority of educators. Furthermore, according to KHD, education is intended so that students, as individuals and members of society, can achieve the highest levels of safety and happiness.

At a glance, the philosophical foundation of the Merdeka Curriculum shows a development from the 2013 Curriculum, whose philosophical foundation did not specifically mention the thoughts of Indonesian educational figures. The 2013 Curriculum was developed with a philosophical foundation that provided a basis for developing the full potential of students into quality Indonesian individuals, as outlined in the national education goals (Permendikbud RI No. 57 of 2014). Thus, from a philosophical standpoint, the Merdeka Curriculum appears to strive or revive the thoughts or spirit of post-war educational figures who aimed to create independent individuals as the foundation for nation-building. In this regard, the Merdeka Curriculum seeks to bridge the realization of the founding fathers' ideals of Indonesia, which may have been forgotten, resulting in the education system not achieving its goals.

The next question arises as to whether the effort to revive the thoughts of post-war Indonesian educational figures is sufficiently contextual for application today, considering the change in social and global conditions compared to the post-war era. To answer this, the author will compare several concepts of post-war educational thought with the Merdeka Curriculum, especially in aspects of educational theory, culture, teachers, the educational

environment, spirituality, and student competencies. It should be noted that the author will not compare the Merdeka Curriculum with the Indonesian post-war curriculum, but rather with the thoughts of educational figures reflected in various writings.

The subsequent question is how the thoughts of post-war Indonesian educational figures can enrich the philosophical foundation and spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum. From this, insights can be gained that could strengthen the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum while also revisiting post-war educational thoughts that might still be relevant today.

1. Post-war Educational Thought and Merdeka Curriculum

The foundation of post-war educational curriculum thought can be referred to as "post-colonial education theory," meaning an attempt to balance colonial education systems with education derived from one's own culture and belief in one's ability to grow. The form and content of post-war education are a "counter-institution" to the colonial institution created by the Dutch East Indies government aimed at making every Indonesian *son een trouw en verdienstelijk Nederlands-onderdaan* (a loyal and meritorious Dutch subject).

The orientation of post-war national educational policies is no different from the conception of Taman Siswa's thinking as part of the nation's movement to educate the people and prosper the nation. The goal of national education is to make every child a citizen who uses personal progress to advance the country and the nation. The basic principle is to strengthen patriotism, nationalistic understanding, and orientation towards the masses. The note that Nationalism for Taman Siswa is broad nationalism, based on humanity, opposing chauvinism. "National in nature, humanity in essence," said KHD (Dewantara, 1956).

KHD in this context warns of the dangers of excessive national pride. According to him, Awareness of the shortcomings and mistakes of the nation that need to be corrected through joint efforts must remain. True national education acknowledges the contributions of other nations so that the child realizes that no human progress is achieved without cooperation among several nations.

Post-war educational thinking is oriented towards creating independent individuals or students who are capable of becoming independent workers, who are free in mind, soul, and energy. In shaping these independent individuals, Ki Mangunsarkoro (1951) mentioned that education must be able to free itself from a heavy and binding traditional obstacle of children's souls, namely the inclusion of aspirations as educational goals. "As soon as a child enters school, he must aspire to become a doctor, engineer, high-ranking official, and so on, which essentially means that school is for obtaining status. In the colonial era, the Dutch deliberately made it the goal of education in Indonesia because people who were obsessed with status were easily lured into becoming traitors. Therefore, it is necessary to establish now a clearer understanding and purpose of education that leads children to freedom and high humanity" (Mangunsarkoro, 1951).

Post-war educational thinking also emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of the Pancasila state foundation. For this reason, Crijns and Reksosiswojo (1960) mentioned that educators should teach children:

- Living on a religious basis: The first and foremost task of education is to shape the child so that they are truly aware of their basic obligations and are also able to fulfill them.

- Living as a true human being: Respecting and loving all living beings, especially human life, its rights, and freedoms. Then we must be patient and compassionate for peace, generous, loyal, and honest.
- Living as a true Indonesian: Thinking, feeling, and acting nationally. All citizens must love their own nation, and if there is a threat, they must be willing to sacrifice themselves. A citizen must also have a noble, calm, and balanced demeanor in all actions, be humble and friendly in social interactions.
- Living on the basis of democracy: Shaping children into democratic and sovereign citizens.
- Living on the basis of justice: Creating a society free from oppressive social conditions and children who strive for justice wherever they are.

As the post-war educational thought was based on resistance to the previous education system, the Design of the Merdeka Curriculum is also based on an evaluation of the previous curriculum (the 2013 curriculum), which was considered unsuccessful in meeting national educational goals. The Merdeka Curriculum in this case elaborates on the concept of independence on 3 (three) principles that differentiate it from the previous curriculum, namely: (1) ensuring and supporting the development of competencies and character, (2) flexibility, and (3) focusing on essential content. Its implementation is done through:

- Project-based learning for the development of soft skills and character, including faith, piety, noble character; mutual cooperation; global diversity; independence; critical thinking; and creativity. Around 25% of the available lesson hours in the Merdeka Learning curriculum structure should be allocated to project activities.
- Focus on essential materials is expected to provide sufficient time for in-depth learning of basic competencies such as literacy and numeracy. The Merdeka Curriculum is expected to reduce the burden of learning and face-to-face classroom hours, including a reduction in burdensome teaching materials for students. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the development of competencies as well as the formation of character and the development of students' creativity.
- Teachers have the flexibility to conduct teaching according to student's abilities (teaching at the right level) and also to make adjustments to local contexts and content (Mulyasa, & Ulinuha, 2023).

The Merdeka Curriculum also adopts post-war thinking, namely the orientation of “patriotism, nationalism, and democracy,” as well as Pancasila in the concept of forming the Pancasila Student Profile (Rukmana et al, 2023). The difference is that the Pancasila Student Profile also includes elements of character and 21st-century competencies. The Pancasila Student Profile, based on Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 22 of 2020, includes aspects of (1) Faith, piety to Almighty God, and noble character, (2) cooperation, (3) Critical thinking, (4) Global diversity, (5) Independence, and (6) Creativity.

2. Cultural Aspect

The discussion on national culture in the Merdeka Curriculum is outlined in Minister of Education and Culture Regulation Number 12 of 2024, which mentions the philosophical basis of the Merdeka curriculum as consisting of a curriculum based on local culture or making the nation's culture the root of the curriculum with the aim of building present and future life. This concept is elaborated in flexible intracurricular programs (curriculum adapting to cultural characteristics and local wisdom). For example, local content materials can be taught in three ways: by integrating local content into existing subjects, integrating

local content into Pancasila student profile strengthening projects, or by developing special local content subjects as in the 2013 Curriculum. In general, the Merdeka Curriculum's view of cultural values is to preserve the noble cultural values of the nation and absorb new values from global culture positively and productively (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2024).

For comparison, post-war Indonesian thought also emphasizes the importance of cultural aspects, as seen in the thinking of KHD that, "Taman Siswa does not embody a subculture" (Dewantara, 1972). The culture of Taman Siswa is the culture of Indonesia. The Taman Siswa culture is the Indonesian culture." In this regard, although the concept of Taman Siswa is influenced by Javanese culture, Ki Hajar Dewantara does not see it as a separate part of the national culture in general.

Post-war educational thinkers consider that Indonesians inherently have a love for culture. Therefore, educational policy essentially only needs to revive the cultural, aesthetic, and ethical religious elements that have been forgotten but still live in the blood of Indonesians (Ki Tjokrodijidjo, 1972).

In the early days of Independence, the Republic of Indonesia was facing problems of division both due to ideological differences and regional sentiments. Therefore, cultural education policies were carefully regulated and more directed towards uniting feelings of cooperation. KHD states that every individual should be proud to be Indonesian above the love for their region. According to him, "Regional love may be seen as God's will, but not so with love for the homeland. Therefore, teaching and education need to develop regional love into love for the homeland" (Dewantara, 1972).

Both the Merdeka Curriculum and post-war thinking view regional and national cultures as important parts of development. The difference is, while post-war thinking seeks to emphasize national unity due to the fragility of the newly born state from regional disputes, the Merdeka Curriculum opens space for preserving the noble cultural values of regions (local content) through a flexible curriculum while attempting to absorb new values from global culture positively and productively.

3. Teacher Aspect

The success of implementing the national education system depends heavily on teachers as the direct implementers of the curriculum. Teachers play a crucial role in both post-war educational thinking and the Merdeka Curriculum.

Post-war Indonesia faced a shortage of teachers, so educational policies were oriented towards meeting this need by striving for teacher education and other educational personnel. However, the teacher education process remained strict because in the concept of Taman Siswa, teachers are no longer just individuals who are good at teaching in front of the class, but they must also have other abilities as educators, supervisors of student activities, guides, counselors, advisors, and possess proper insights into relevant literature/technology for their tasks. Teachers perform their duties based on "Liefde en toewijding" (love and dedication) in finding time and opportunities fully, to practice education of spirituality, aesthetics, sociality, and ethics (Adisasmita, 1951). For this purpose, clear selection criteria are needed for prospective teachers at all levels of educational institutions in addition to ensuring adequate teaching facilities.

What does it mean to have a teacher training school without the latest laboratory equipment and library resources? The minimum and maximum teaching hours must also be limited, with the intention of having time to rethink what has been taught and to add knowledge through reading. Naturally, this leads to the creation of other primary conveniences, such as living expenses, housing, electricity, and so on. A teacher is required to have honest, consistent, humble, and compassionate behavior toward students. The absence of one or two of these behavioral elements will undoubtedly diminish the teacher's authority in the classroom and in society.

In Ki Hajar Dewantara's view, the role of a teacher is actualized through the philosophy of; *Ing Ngarso Sung Tulodo, Ing Madyo Mangun Karso, Tut Wurihandayani* (Efendi et al, 2023). This means that the teaching-learning process is independent, prioritizes a family-like system, and becomes a noble model exemplified by educators.

The principle of *tut wuri handayani* from Ki Hajar Dewantara, which means guiding from behind, shows the democratic nature of a teacher, in the sense that students are free to choose their own path; but the teacher follows closely from behind to guide if deemed necessary according to their discretion. Given the heavy role of teachers, teacher education is carried out to prepare teachers thoroughly, it should not be produced through instant processes. Because if a teacher is not mature, they can produce misguided students. Adisasmita (1951) states that teachers should not only provide necessary and good knowledge but should also educate students to seek knowledge themselves and use it for the common good.

To be able to perform their role well, post-war educational thinking emphasizes the aspect of authority as an essential requirement for a teacher. Without it, students will not follow guidance from the teacher. Being a teacher is not just about mastering knowledge and skills but also having inner qualities, namely Sattwa or stability and calmness (Susongko, 2023). Furthermore, Pribadi (1987) adds that the effectiveness of education must involve aspects of authority so that teachers affect the expected behavior of students. Authority can only exist if the educator has realized the values they want to develop in the students.

According to Adisasmita (1951), students must obey and respect their teachers. Therefore, teachers must also possess qualities that require students to respect them. Teachers must prove their superiority to students in terms of knowledge, morality, civilization, and self-restraint (*Zelfbeheersing*). In addition, teachers must be able to establish close cooperation with school principals, parents, and the government.

In line with this view, the Merdeka Curriculum also places teachers as authorities in educating students and implementing the curriculum in learning. In addition to being a source of learning, teachers are expected to be learning facilitators supported by professional, pedagogical, personality, and social competencies. Through these competencies, teachers are expected to realize the implementation of independent learning policies and their goals. (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2022).

Adapting the concept of *tut wuri handayani*, the concept of the Merdeka Curriculum also promotes student-centered learning conducted by teacher facilitators: focusing on individual students, their experiences, backgrounds, perspectives, talents, interests, abilities, and learning needs. In this context, creative practices in education must be carried out to help students build knowledge by defining what is important to them and how the process strengthens their confidence and individuality (Sibagariang et al, 2021).

To enable teachers to fulfill their role effectively, the Merdeka Curriculum regulates: 1. Reducing the heavy administrative burden on teachers, 2. Providing space for teachers to develop more varied (flexible) learning tools, 3. Providing open access for teachers to use various learning resources, 4. Providing more space for teachers to consider what students need to achieve learning goals, and 5. Considering the need for improved English language competence, the Ministry encourages the provision of teacher training for those who will teach English in schools.

The consolidation of material focused only on essential content is regulated in the Merdeka Curriculum so that teachers have space for discussions, debates, and the use of other teaching methods that can encourage students to develop their thinking and character (Bangkara, 2022).

4. Educational Environment Aspect

The educational environment receives high attention in post-war educational thinking. In this regard, KHD introduces the *SISTIM TRISENTRA*, which is a concept of education that can be carried out both inside and outside of schools to enliven, enhance, and delight the social feelings of Indonesian children, namely the family environment, the educational environment, and the youth movement environment that need to collaborate.

The family environment is placed as the first and most important center of education because since the emergence of human civilization until now, the family has always influenced the moral growth of every individual. The feelings of love, unity, and other feelings related to moral education are found within the family, and no other form of education can match it.

The educational environment, in this case, is the center of education, which is specifically responsible for nurturing intellectual intelligence (intellectual development) and the imparting of knowledge. However, KHD criticizes the Western school model's view that only focuses on the search for and imparting of knowledge and intellectual intelligence, which he believes will always be *zakelijk* or soulless.

Without the spiritual nuances in the organization of schools, then all employees there will be as enthusiastic as "workers" or equivalent to instructors, not teachers. Such a school organization will distance children from their family environment and their community environment (Dewantara, 1972).

Furthermore, education needs to involve the youth environment, namely the youth movement that still involves the elders as advisors, granting adequate freedom to the youth to observe and act, and supporting efforts towards the development of spiritual intelligence or moral character (character formation), of national cultural flow (national morality), and towards the close relationship between the family environment, the educational environment, and the youth environment, as centers of education. In essence, every center of education must understand its role and position:

- Family to educate moral values and social behavior.
- Educational institutions as centers of knowledge, namely for the effort to seek and provide knowledge, in addition to intellectual education.
- The youth movement as the area of independence for the youth to exercise self-control, which is very necessary for character formation.

The Merdeka Curriculum does not specifically discuss the educational environment. However, the Minister of Education and Culture explained the dimension of education as an interaction between three environments: curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular (Mulyasa, 2021). The role of the family in the Merdeka Curriculum, as mentioned in the Buku Saku Kurikulum Merdeka (2022), is only to provide support to schools in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Parents are expected to become learning companions for their children besides understanding the competencies that need to be achieved by the child in each phase. In this regard, the Merdeka Curriculum has not placed parents in a central role in education, especially in terms of moral values and social behavior.

Moreover, the Merdeka Curriculum does not place the youth movement as one of the important dimensions of education. One form of youth movement, namely the Scout movement, is no longer a mandatory extracurricular activity for students. However, youth activities like the Scouts can build character and represent values of nationalism, humanity, and love for the homeland (Rukmana K, 2023).

5. Aspect of Spirituality

Ki Hajar Dewantara, like several post-war education figures, considered the spiritual or inner aspect of education important as an antithesis to the colonial education system, which emphasized worldly aspects more. However, they remained progressive in their thinking, avoiding excessive spiritual orientation, as evidenced by the "narimo" nature and fatalistic tendencies of many Indonesian societies at that time, which was considered to hinder progress. "An examination of life that prioritizes noble spirituality must now be accompanied by its realization in action in the worldly realm. The religious nature of our nation must be manifested through actions and services to fellow humans, to society, so that it is a religion not only performed by worshiping the Almighty but also through actions towards society, towards every human being or creature of God" (Mangunsarkoro, 1952).

The view of spirituality is reflected in the ideals of Taman Siswa, namely to create happy individuals or those who are fulfilled both materially and spiritually. Ki Hajar Dewantara metaphorically describes someone who is materially wealthy but suffers spiritually as "riding a motorcycle while crying." Similarly, it is not someone who feels satisfied even though their material needs are lacking (content with a dilapidated house, torn clothes, unpleasant food, and so on).

One of the pillars of Taman Siswa education states that the orientation towards high spirituality must not forget or neglect the worldly aspects because the elevation of the soul must also mean sovereignty over the worldly or, in Dutch, "Necessary and useful knowledge is that which meets the ideal and material needs of humans as members of the environment." The order of birth, the peace of its soul, is the society that Taman Siswa aims to achieve. According to Taman Siswa, an Orderly Peaceful society is the highest goal to give birth to Independent Humans as a place for free human life, and conversely, the growth of independent humans is also a fundamental requirement for the realization of an orderly peaceful society.

In contrast to post-war educational thinking, the Merdeka Curriculum does not specifically address spiritual and material aspects. Generally, only the curriculum orientation is mentioned, aiming to make Indonesian students lifelong learners with global competencies and behavior by Pancasila values (Pancasila Student Profile), with the main goal being the

preservation of the noble values and morals of the nation, readiness to become global citizens, the realization of social justice, and the achievement of 21st-century competencies (Rusnaini, 2021). The loss of the aspect of "individual happiness and safety achievement" that once underpinned Ki Hajar Dewantara's concept of education in this regard becomes a clear distinction.

6. Aspect of Student Competence

Ki Hajar Dewantara, through the principles of *Taman Siswa*, did not specifically mention the competencies that a student should possess. In his view, teachers need to provide necessary and good knowledge to students, while educating the students to seek knowledge themselves and use it for the common good. Good and necessary knowledge is that which is beneficial for both worldly and spiritual needs in social life (Sajoga, 1952).

Improving literacy became one of the main goals of post-war education. The Dutch education system, which could only reach 3-10% of the Dutch East Indies population, left the majority of the population unable to read. Providing basic education to the population thus became a priority in post-war education policy.

However, half a century after the implementation of post-war education policies, it was found that the reading interest of Indonesian society was still low. One of the reasons is attributed to teaching methods that are still dictatorial, thus not stimulating students to enjoy reading. This is different from the Dutch education system which encouraged students to read. During the Dutch era, teachers did not teach reading (dictating), but rather students had to read books themselves, and then draw conclusions. Every opportunity was filled with activities calling students to the front of the class to be asked about the books they read. This activity continued continuously for nineteen years. Therefore, reading became a habit. The loss of educational methods since independence may have led to the continued low interest in reading until the present generation.

Improving reading interest or literacy skills has again become a concern in the Merdeka Curriculum. An OECD report states that about 70% of Indonesian students are categorized as having low literacy skills, where they are unable to identify the main idea of a sentence or a slightly longer reading (Syawahid, M., & Putrawangsa, S., 2022).

Improving literacy skills is an integral part of the Merdeka Curriculum's orientation to equip students with 21st-century skills, namely learning & innovation skills (4Cs), life & career skills, information, media, & technology skills, as well as key subjects (3Rs) & 21st-century themes (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Various formulations of these competencies are considerations in the preparation of the Pancasila Student Profile and Graduation Competency Standards.

Adapting to the competency needs of the 21st century, the Merdeka Curriculum also changes the science and social studies specialization system at the high school level. The Merdeka Curriculum does not eliminate specialization but modifies it by starting specialization in grade XI and opening opportunities for students to choose subjects according to their interests, talents, and abilities.

The changes made by the Merdeka Curriculum are basically in line with the evaluation of education policies conducted before independence. At that time, the Netherlands had a

decision that had not been implemented until the end of the occupation, which was to eliminate the science-social studies divide at the high school level. Because, according to education figures at that time, in the twentieth century all sciences would require language, mathematics, and logic based on language and mathematics. Language occupied a very important position in the Dutch education system. And its teaching was tightly controlled from elementary school to university level. The Netherlands emphasized language education because, according to them, one cannot think without language. So that someone can think clearly, the language used must also be clear. As is known, all sciences are based on thought. Failure to implement this system resulted in educated Indonesians being more interested in exact sciences, economics, law, and so on. The abolition of the rigid specialization system by the Merdeka Curriculum, although late, should therefore be able to improve student competencies and promote better scientific growth.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that Kurikulum Merdeka acts as the revival of post-war educational thinking in aspects of educational theory, culture, teachers, and student competencies, although there are some adjustments in line with the times. The differences between Kurikulum Merdeka and post-war thinking in this regard are evident in aspects of spirituality and the educational environment, which can be further studied to strengthen the foundation of Kurikulum Merdeka in achieving national educational goals.

The next challenge lies in the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka policies to ensure consistent implementation across various educational institutions, as well as the threat of policy changes in line with political regime changes in Indonesia in 2024.

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