



Reconstructing Teachers' Role and Learning Paradigm under the Merdeka Curriculum

Fatimah Choirunnisa¹, Muhammad Ibrahim²

¹English Education Program, Faculty of Culture and Languages, UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta

²Madrasah Tsanawiyah 5 Karanganyar

Email : choirunnisafatimah@gmail.com¹, aimbrahim06@gmail.com²

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of Indonesia's educational paradigm through the Merdeka Curriculum signifies a philosophical and pedagogical shift from standardized instruction toward learner-centered and humanistic education. This conceptual study aims to analyze the reconstruction of teachers' roles as transformative intellectuals within the framework of pedagogical freedom. Drawing upon critical curriculum theory, reflective pedagogy, and constructivist learning models, the analysis reveals that teachers are repositioned as epistemic agents who design, interpret, and enact the curriculum in response to contextual realities. The study highlights three interdependent dimensions—epistemic autonomy, contextual flexibility, and collaborative accountability—that are the foundation of professional freedom in teaching. The findings suggest that meaningful implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum requires not only structural reform but also ethical and epistemological renewal among teachers. Thus, educational transformation depends on the moral and intellectual agency of teachers who continuously reconstruct the meaning of learning, knowledge, and freedom in Indonesian primary education.

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ABSTRAK

Transformasi paradigma pendidikan Indonesia melalui Kurikulum Merdeka menandai pergeseran filosofis dan pedagogis dari pembelajaran yang terstandar menuju pendidikan yang berpusat pada peserta didik dan berlandaskan humanisme. Kajian konseptual ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis rekonstruksi peran guru sebagai intelektual transformatif dalam kerangka kebebasan pedagogis. Dengan mendasarkan pada teori kurikulum kritis, pedagogi reflektif, dan pendekatan konstruktivistik, analisis menunjukkan bahwa guru diposisikan sebagai agen epistemik yang merancang, menafsirkan, dan mengimplementasikan kurikulum sesuai konteks nyata pembelajaran. Kajian ini mengidentifikasi tiga dimensi yang saling berkaitan—otonomi epistemik, fleksibilitas kontekstual, dan akuntabilitas kolaboratif berfungsi sebagai dasar kebebasan profesional dalam mengajar. Hasil kajian menegaskan bahwa keberhasilan implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka tidak hanya menuntut reformasi struktural, tetapi juga pembaruan etis dan epistemologis pada diri guru. Dengan demikian, transformasi pendidikan bergantung pada keberanikan moral dan kapasitas intelektual guru dalam merekonstruksi.



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Corresponding Author:

Fatimah Choirunnisa

UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta

E-mail: choirunnisafatimah@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's education reform has entered a transformative era since the Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) was introduced as part of the Merdeka Belajar policy, which was initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2019 (Lathifah et al., 2022; Kemendikbudristek, 2023). This reform was implemented as a strategic response to the rigidity of the previous curriculum models, including Kurikulum 2013 and its predecessors, which were criticized for being excessively centralized, content heavy, and less adaptable to the diverse learning requirements of students (Prihantoro, 2021). The Merdeka Curriculum endeavors to restructure the educational paradigm by fostering contextualized learning, autonomy, and flexibility. It places a particular emphasis on the development of the Pancasila Student Profile, which embodies global awareness, creativity, critical thinking, cooperation, and independence (Kemendikbudristek, 2023).

A fundamental epistemological shift from a transmissive model of education to a constructivist and humanistic paradigm is at the core of this educational transformation (Doll, 1993; Dewey, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). The transfer of information from teachers to students is no longer the sole perception of learning. Instead, it is viewed as a process of meaning-making that involves active engagement, reflection, and social interaction (Schwab, 2013; Tyler, 1949). According to Hargreaves & Fullan (2020) and Sani (2022) this paradigm shift transforms the teacher's role from that of an information provider to that of a learning facilitator, designer of learning experiences, and agent of pedagogical transformation.

In this framework, teachers are no longer assessed solely on the basis of their subject matter expertise but on their capacity to establish inclusive, differentiated, and student-centered learning environments (Putri & Rahmawati, 2022; Yuliani, 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum prioritizes the customization of learning pathways to align with the potential and interests of each student in the context of primary education. It grants schools and educators the ability to construct educational programs that are consistent with the developmental phases of students and the local context (Kemendikbud, 2021).

This autonomy also places a new level of responsibility on teachers, necessitating that they become reflective practitioners, curriculum innovators, and mentors who can translate abstract policy principles into concrete classroom practice (Widodo, 2023). Teachers are expected to incorporate project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and differentiated instruction to ensure that learning is competency-oriented and meaningful rather than exam-driven (Budiarti & Sari, 2022). Consequently, the professional agency of teachers significantly influences the success or failure of the Merdeka Curriculum implementation (Haryanto, 2023).

This reform has been the subject of both promise and challenge in previous empirical investigations. Prihantoro (2021) found that although many educators subscribe to the philosophy of Merdeka Belajar, their practical comprehension of student-centered pedagogy



remains limited, particularly in rural schools with low digital literacy. Supriyadi & Nugroho (2022) observed that infrastructure inequality, insufficient professional development, and inconsistent policy dissemination hindered optimal implementation. Conversely, research conducted by Widodo (2023) and Rahmat et al. (2024) suggests that educators who apply reflective teaching and collaborative practices demonstrate substantial improvements in student outcomes and classroom engagement.

These findings underscore a crucial insight. Policy innovation in education will remain rhetorical without corresponding teacher transformation. However, despite the growing number of empirical and policy-oriented studies on the Merdeka Curriculum, there is still a lack of conceptual analyses that integrate classical curriculum theories with the evolving paradigm of educational freedom in Indonesia. The philosophical and theoretical reconstruction of the teacher's role has not been thoroughly examined, as most research tends to focus on technical implementation, classroom strategies, or policy evaluation.

The present article aims to address this conceptual gap by proposing a theoretical synthesis that situates the teacher as a transformative intellectual Giroux (2011b) within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. This analysis does not assume that meaningful curriculum reform requires only structural change but also an epistemic reorientation in the conception of learning, teaching, and knowledge. The innovative aspect of this paper lies in its integrative approach, which connects classical curriculum theory (Tyler, Taba, Schwab, Doll) with contemporary educational movements, including humanistic pedagogy, postmodern curriculum theory, and Indonesia's national agenda for Merdeka Belajar. This study redefines curriculum implementation as an act of intellectual mediation between national policy, local culture, and learner diversity by positioning teachers as epistemic agents rather than mere implementers. Ultimately, the objective of this conceptual investigation is to enrich the academic discourse on curriculum transformation and to establish a philosophical foundation for the enhancement of pedagogical creativity and professional autonomy among primary education teachers in Indonesia.

DISCUSSION

1. Theoretical Foundations of Curriculum Reconstruction

The philosophical foundation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum can be traced back to a broader intellectual movement in curriculum theory that aims to redefine the purpose, structure, and agency of educational design. In its classical definition, curriculum is not merely a list of subjects or instructional content but a structured plan that epitomizes the cultural, social, and epistemological assumptions of a society (Tyler, 1949). Tyler (1949) introduced the rationale model in his seminal work *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Tyler posited that every curriculum should be designed through a systematic process that involves defining educational objectives, selecting learning experiences, organizing them effectively, and evaluating outcomes. This framework was indicative of the positivist conviction that learning could be standardized, measured, and planned. It had a profound impact on educational systems worldwide, including Indonesia, which for decades implemented curriculum models that were based on hierarchical instructional sequences and behavioral objectives (Sani, 2022).

However, post-industrial and postmodern critiques in the late twentieth century challenged this mechanistic perspective on curriculum. One of the foremost proponents of postmodern curriculum theory, William Doll (1993), rejected the Tylerian logic of control and prediction, contending that education is inherently complex, uncertain, and nonlinear. Doll



conceptualized curriculum as an open system that is defined by recursiveness, nonlinearity, and indeterminacy. She posited that meaningful learning is not the result of fixed objectives but rather of dynamic interaction among instructors, learners, and context. In the same vein, Joseph Schwab (2013) advocated for the "practical turn" in curriculum studies, which involves the teacher's active involvement in the interpretation, negotiation, and enactment of curriculum within specific contexts, rather than abstract theory. Schwab's perspective suggests that educators are not inert implementers but rather intellectual agents who translate societal objectives into pedagogical practice through reflective judgment. This transition from technical rationality to deliberative and interpretive practice is reminiscent of John Dewey (2021) pragmatist philosophy, which prioritizes the experiential and developmental aspects of education rather than the transmission of static knowledge. Dewey perceived curriculum as a dynamic construct that is derived from the learner's interaction with the environment, in which meaning is perpetually reconstructed through reflection and inquiry. In the same vein, Lev Vygotsky (1978) elucidated through his sociocultural theory that learning is a socially mediated process; cognition is cultivated through engagement in culturally significant activities.

These theoretical perspectives collectively support the *Merdeka Curriculum*'s emphasis on student-centered learning, inquiry-based pedagogy, and collaborative meaning-making Kemendikbudristek (2023). In the Indonesian context, the legacy of earlier curricula, such as Kurikulum 2013 and Kurikulum Berbasis Kompetensi, was primarily instrumental in terms of its goal to align instructional outcomes with standardized national assessments (Prihantoro, 2021). The *Merdeka Curriculum* is a paradigmatic departure from this tradition, as it embraces pedagogical flexibility and epistemological pluralism. It defines the curriculum as a dynamic framework that must adjust to the diverse social and cultural realities of Indonesian learners, thereby redefining it as a living document. A living curriculum, as Doll (1993) argued, recognizes ambiguity, embraces diversity, and prioritizes dialogue as the foundation of learning. Freire (1970) conceived of education as an act of liberation, in which learners are co-creators of knowledge rather than objects of instruction. This perspective aligns with the previously mentioned perspective.

Moreover, Schwab's (2013) concept of "the four commonplaces"—subject matter, learner, teacher, and milieu—offers a comprehensive analytical framework for examining the manner in which the *Merdeka Curriculum* redistributes curricular authority. The *Merdeka* model restores equilibrium by empowering instructors and learners as active participants, whereas traditional curriculum models placed disproportionate weight on subject matter and state control. Consequently, the educator is in a deliberative role, serving as a mediator between the normative objectives of the curriculum and the lived experience of the classroom (Haryanto, 2023). This process of deliberation is interpretive rather than mechanical, necessitating that instructors employ phronesis, which is practical wisdom that is rooted in professional judgment, ethics, and context (Biesta, 2015). The curriculum reconstruction under the *Merdeka* framework also reflects global educational trends toward the democratization and humanization of learning.

UNESCO (2020) promotes the establishment of "a new social contract for education" that prioritizes the agency of learners, ecological awareness, and cultural relevance. This vision is reflected in the *Merdeka Curriculum*, which advocates for pedagogical freedom as the foundation of educational quality and rejects homogenized, test-driven models. Nevertheless, this autonomy is not unconstrained; rather, it is a form of disciplined creativity that involves teachers reinterpreting national objectives using local wisdom and evidence-based pedagogy (Kemendikbud, 2021). In this manner, curriculum reconstruction is transformed into an epistemic negotiation, a delicate equilibrium between pedagogical innovation and policy prescription.

In conclusion, the theoretical underpinnings of the *Merdeka Curriculum* represent a significant ontological transformation: the transition from the perception of knowledge as an



external commodity to its comprehension as a relational and emergent phenomenon. This transformation places the teacher at the center of educational praxis, not as a transmitter of information, but as an epistemic architect who creates experiences that enable learners to construct their own understanding. In this regard, the reconstruction of curriculum theory is analogous to the reconstruction of teacher identity, which demonstrates that meaningful educational reform is unattainable without repositioning teachers as intellectual co-authors of the learning process (Giroux, 2011; Widodo, 2023). Thus, the *Merdeka Curriculum* must be regarded as a philosophical movement that is rooted in the emancipatory purpose of education, deliberation, and complexity, rather than merely as a policy innovation.

2. Teachers as Transformative Intellectuals in the *Merdeka Curriculum*

The transformation of the teacher's role within the *Merdeka Curriculum* is not merely a pedagogical adjustment but an epistemological reorientation that redefines what it means to teach and to know. In the traditional model of Indonesian education, teachers were largely positioned as transmitters of knowledge, functioning within a bureaucratic hierarchy that dictated instructional objectives, content, and assessment standards (Prihantoro, 2021). This positioning reflected a technocratic conception of teaching as the mechanical implementation of state-defined curriculum—what Giroux (2011) calls the “technician model of education.” Within this model, teachers act as executors of externally imposed agendas, with limited professional autonomy or interpretive agency. The *Merdeka Curriculum* explicitly challenges this legacy by reframing the teacher as a transformative intellectual—a reflective, autonomous, and socially engaged professional capable of shaping educational discourse and practice (Giroux, 2011; Freire, 1970).

Giroux (2011) notion of the teacher as a transformative intellectual is foundational to this redefinition. He argues that teachers are not neutral conveyors of knowledge but active participants in the struggle over meaning, identity, and power in education. Teaching, therefore, is a political and moral act is a form of cultural production that either reproduces or resists dominant ideologies. Similarly, Paulo Freire (1970) emphasizes that educators must engage in praxis, the unity of reflection and action, to transform oppressive structures and promote humanization through dialogue. Under the *Merdeka Curriculum*, this transformative ethos materializes in the form of pedagogical freedom: teachers are encouraged to design contextual learning experiences, integrate local wisdom, and foster critical inquiry that aligns with the principles of Profil Pelajar Pancasila (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). Thus, the teacher becomes not only a transmitter of national values but also a mediator between policy ideals and local sociocultural realities.

The reconceptualization of teachers as transformative intellectuals also entails a fundamental shift from instrumental rationality to critical rationality (Haberman, 1984; Biesta, 2015). Whereas instrumental rationality seeks efficiency and control, critical rationality values dialogue, reflection, and emancipation. Within the *Merdeka Curriculum*, this shift manifests through teacher's capacity to engage in reflective inquiry—the systematic examination of their assumptions, pedagogical choices, and classroom interactions (Widodo, 2023). Reflective teaching enables educators to adapt instruction to diverse learner needs, challenge inequitable practices, and cultivate democratic learning environments. As Schön (1983) observed, professional competence in complex fields such as education arises not from following rigid procedures but from the ability to think critically in action and reflect upon it. This is in line with the *Merdeka* vision, which views educators as flexible professionals rather than merely carrying out established protocols (Kemendikbud, 2021).

Teacher's transformation under the *Merdeka Curriculum* also demands the development of epistemic agency—the capacity to produce, interpret, and legitimize knowledge within the classroom (Giroux, 2011; Sani, 2022). In a traditional setting, knowledge is often presented as a closed system: predetermined, authoritative, and external to learners. In contrast, the *Merdeka*



Curriculum views knowledge as dialogic and constructed through interaction, inquiry, and experience (Vygotsky, 1978; Dewey, 1938). Teachers must therefore operate as curriculum designers who synthesize theoretical principles with contextual needs, translating curriculum frameworks into meaningful learning pathways. This requires not only pedagogical creativity but also intellectual courage—the willingness to question established norms and experiment with innovative methods. As Fullan (2007) notes, educational change succeeds when teachers become agents of change rather than subjects of reform. They must internalize the reform's philosophy, not simply comply with its structure.

From a sociocultural standpoint, the *Merdeka* Curriculum demands that teachers embody the role of cultural mediators (Bernstein, 2000; Schwab, 2013). They must navigate between national policy expectations, institutional norms, and local community values to ensure that learning remains relevant, inclusive, and empowering. In many Indonesian contexts, this mediation involves integrating indigenous knowledge systems, religious values, and local languages into the formal curriculum. By doing so, teachers enact what Freire (1998) calls critical pedagogy of hope—an educational practice that connects critical consciousness with cultural identity and moral purpose. This localized yet reflective practice underscores the *Merdeka* principle that freedom in learning must coexist with responsibility toward social and cultural integrity (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

A crucial dimension of the transformative intellectual role is collaborative professionalism—teacher's participation in learning communities that promote shared reflection, peer mentoring, and professional dialogue (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). The *Merdeka* Curriculum envisions professional learning as an ongoing, collective endeavor rather than an individual burden. Programs such as Platform *Merdeka Mengajar* (PMM) provide digital ecosystems where teachers exchange ideas, co-develop materials, and document best practices (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). This digital collegiality strengthens the epistemic network of teachers and democratizes access to professional development resources. Through such communities, the teacher's transformative role extends beyond the classroom into the broader social field of educational reform.

Nevertheless, the realization of the transformative intellectual role faces persistent obstacles. Structural constraints—such as centralized accountability systems, administrative overload, and the remnants of exam-driven culture—continue to limit teacher's capacity to exercise autonomy (Supriyadi & Nugroho, 2022). Many educators remain trapped in a compliance-oriented mindset, focusing on procedural conformity rather than pedagogical innovation (Haryanto, 2023). Furthermore, disparities in training quality and access to digital tools create uneven readiness across schools, undermining the equity that the *Merdeka* framework seeks to achieve. Addressing these challenges requires systemic alignment between curriculum design, teacher education, and institutional culture. Without coherent support, the teacher's intellectual agency risks being reduced to rhetorical idealism rather than practical reality.

Despite these challenges, evidence increasingly suggests that when teachers internalize the *Merdeka* philosophy as a personal pedagogical ethic, classroom cultures begin to transform. Teachers who engage in reflective inquiry report higher student engagement, greater inclusivity, and improved collaborative learning outcomes (Rahmat et al., 2024; Widodo, 2023). This demonstrates that curriculum reform cannot be imposed externally; it must be lived internally through teacher's moral and intellectual commitment. As Freire (1970) profoundly asserted, "To teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for its production or construction." Within the *Merdeka* Curriculum, this insight becomes the cornerstone of a new pedagogical contract—one grounded in freedom, dialogue, and shared humanity.



3. The Epistemic Autonomy and Ethical Dimension of Teaching

At the core of the *Merdeka* Curriculum lies the moral and epistemological redefinition of the teaching profession. Teaching is no longer viewed as a technical occupation centered on content delivery but as an intellectual and ethical practice requiring judgment, reflection, and responsibility Biesta (2015). This view parallels Aristotle's concept of phronesis or practical wisdom, where ethical action emerges from deliberation in concrete situations rather than compliance with fixed rules (Carr, 2007). Within the *Merdeka* framework, teachers are entrusted with the epistemic autonomy to interpret curriculum objectives and adapt them to the diverse sociocultural contexts of their students (Haryanto, 2023). Such autonomy, however, is inherently ethical because it requires teachers to act in the best interest of learners while balancing freedom and accountability.

Biesta (2015) distinguishes between three purposes of education: qualification, socialization, and subjectification. The *Merdeka* Curriculum seeks to harmonize these dimensions by emphasizing the formation of autonomous, responsible, and critical citizens. Teachers, as epistemic agents, play a vital role in achieving this balance. They must design learning experiences that develop competence (qualification), foster civic values (socialization), and nurture individuality (subjectification). This triadic mission positions teaching as both a cognitive and moral enterprise. Every pedagogical decision—what to teach, how to assess, when to intervene—is an ethical act shaped by teachers' values and contextual understanding (Kemendikbud, 2021).

Epistemic autonomy also entails the teacher's capacity to critique and generate knowledge rather than merely consume it. The *Merdeka* Curriculum encourages teachers to engage in inquiry based professional reflection, transforming their classrooms into spaces of continuous learning and knowledge co-construction (Widodo, 2023). Through reflective pedagogy, teachers examine the assumptions underlying their practices and evaluate their impact on learners' growth. This intellectual independence aligns with Giroux's (2011) vision of educators as cultural workers who challenge dominant ideologies and reconstruct education as a space of human emancipation. Ethically, *Merdeka Belajar* requires teachers to uphold justice and inclusivity in the learning process. It calls for recognition of each learner's unique voice, background, and potential. Genuine education begins when learners value their experiences as legitimate sources of meaning, as Dewey (1938) asserted. Therefore, epistemic autonomy does not isolate teachers from institutional norms but integrates freedom with moral responsibility toward learners and society. When teachers exercise autonomy through reflection, empathy, and discernment, they embody the ideal of ethical professionalism, which stands as a central pillar of Indonesia's educational renewal.

4. Challenges in the Reconstruction of Teachers' Roles

Despite its transformative intent, the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum faces persistent structural, cultural, and epistemological challenges. First, the inertia of bureaucratic centralization remains a major obstacle. Many schools continue to prioritize administrative compliance and standardized testing over authentic learning (Prihantoro, 2021). This culture of control undermines the curriculum's foundational principle of pedagogical freedom. Teachers, although rhetorically empowered, often find their autonomy constrained by performance metrics and rigid reporting systems (Supriyadi & Nugroho, 2022).

Second, disparities in teacher competence and access to professional development hinder equitable implementation. Rural and underfunded schools frequently lack the digital infrastructure and mentoring support necessary to translate *Merdeka* principles into practice (Haryanto, 2023). As Fullan (2007) emphasizes, systemic reform cannot succeed without parallel investment in teacher learning and institutional capacity. Professional autonomy must therefore be supported through continuous assistance, rather than left to individual struggle.



Third, the philosophical shift from teacher centered to learner centered pedagogy requires cultural change. Many educators were trained within a paradigm of authority and rote instruction, making it difficult to internalize the values of inquiry, collaboration, and reflection (Widodo, 2023). This cognitive dissonance illustrates what Bernstein (2000) terms pedagogic recontextualization, the tension between policy discourse and classroom habitus. Teachers must unlearn inherited practices before constructing new professional identities.

Lastly, the assessment dimension of the *Merdeka* Curriculum remains ambiguous. Although it promotes formative and competency based evaluation, the absence of clear guidelines sometimes leads to inconsistency across schools (Rahmat et al., 2024). The challenge lies in reconciling flexibility with reliability, ensuring that autonomy does not devolve into arbitrariness. Hence, curriculum reform must proceed as a dialectical process that empowers teachers while maintaining coherence, balancing freedom with collective purpose. Addressing these challenges requires a sustained moral and institutional commitment. The *Merdeka* Curriculum cannot thrive through a top down approach; it must evolve as a cultural transformation rooted in teachers' reflective praxis, collegial collaboration, and ethical autonomy. Only through this process can the reconstructed role of the teacher, both intellectual and moral, be fully realized in Indonesia's educational landscape.

5. Toward a Framework of Pedagogical Freedom

The *Merdeka* Curriculum aspires to establish a philosophical and practical framework that balances pedagogical freedom with professional accountability. This framework, referred to here as pedagogical freedom, is not a license for unbounded autonomy but a structured form of intellectual and ethical independence that enables teachers to make contextually responsive decisions while upholding educational integrity (Biesta, 2015). It comprises three interrelated dimensions: epistemic autonomy, contextual flexibility, and collaborative accountability. These dimensions together construct the architecture of a teacher's professional identity in the *Merdeka* era.

Epistemic autonomy positions teachers as knowledge creators rather than passive implementers of state prescribed curricula. Within this dimension, teachers exercise interpretive judgment to adapt curriculum goals to learners' needs, grounded in reflective pedagogy and professional wisdom (phronesis) (Carr, 2007; Widodo, 2023). Contextual flexibility, meanwhile, allows teachers to respond to diverse cultural, social, and technological conditions. The *Merdeka* approach recognizes that Indonesia's educational landscape is far from homogeneous; learning must therefore be locally grounded yet globally informed (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). Lastly, collaborative accountability situates autonomy within a network of shared professionalism, emphasizing peer learning, mentorship, and institutional coherence (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). True freedom in teaching is collective, not isolated; it thrives in communities of reflective practitioners.

Pedagogical freedom thus redefines the teacher as an epistemic architect, a designer of learning experiences and ethical guardian of student development. Teachers are entrusted to reconstruct curriculum through critical reflection, dialogue, and moral responsibility. This conception resonates with Dewey's (1938) vision of education as a democratic process of continuous growth and Schwab (2013) notion of deliberative professionalism. In this sense, *Merdeka Belajar* is not simply an educational policy but a philosophical reorientation toward the humanization of teaching and learning. The framework of pedagogical freedom demands that teachers embody a synthesis of intellectual independence and communal responsibility, which serve as the hallmarks of a mature and dynamic educational system.



CONCLUSIONS

The conceptual exploration of the *Merdeka* Curriculum demonstrates that genuine educational transformation in Indonesia hinges on reconstructing the teacher's role as an autonomous, reflective, and ethically grounded professional. This curriculum reform moves beyond structural or administrative change, which is why it represents an epistemological shift from transmissive to constructivist, deliberative, and humanistic paradigms of learning. Teachers are positioned not merely as executors of state mandates but as transformative intellectuals and epistemic architects who interpret, negotiate, and enact the curriculum through reflective judgment and contextual wisdom. The framework of pedagogical freedom within the *Merdeka* vision integrates three inseparable dimensions: epistemic autonomy, which empowers teachers to design and adapt meaningful learning experiences; contextual flexibility, which allows education to reflect the social, cultural, and technological realities of Indonesia's diverse learners; and collaborative accountability, which sustains autonomy through shared professionalism and ethical responsibility. These dimensions collectively redefine teaching as both an intellectual and moral vocation and a practice of continuous inquiry that bridges policy ideals with learners' lived experiences. In this regard, the success of *Merdeka Belajar* is not determined by compliance with standardized indicators but by the depth of teachers' reflective praxis, their capacity to cultivate critical and compassionate learners, and their contribution to building a democratic, human-centered education system. Ultimately, curriculum reform without teacher transformation is hollow; the renewal of Indonesia's educational paradigm must therefore rest upon the moral courage, intellectual agency, and ethical commitment of teachers who continuously reconstruct the meaning of freedom, knowledge, and learning in their classrooms.

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