



## THE PERSISTENCE OF COLONIALITY IN INDONESIAN EDUCATION: A TAN MALAKA-FREIREAN READING

Elin Wijaya

Yogyakarta State University

(Naskah diterima: 1 January 2026, disetujui: 28 January 2026)

### Abstract

*This article analyzes the Merdeka Curriculum and the idea of Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) as a contestation of the meaning of “independence” in education. The study distinguishes procedural independence in terms of flexibility of methods, differentiation, and simplification of content from substantive independence in critical pedagogy, namely liberation from oppressive power relations. The research uses literature study and conceptual-critical analysis of policy documents and the literature of Tan Malaka and Paulo Freire. The findings show that the novelty of the Merdeka Curriculum appears strong at the methodological level, but it is still vulnerable to maintaining the coloniality of education at the structural level. This vulnerability is seen in three axes: knowledge power that remains rooted in official knowledge, evaluation that maintains the function of selection and reproduces achievement hierarchies, and goal orientation that easily shifts to become instrumental and compatible with human capital logic. Paradoxically, students appear autonomous in their learning methods but remain locked into comparative measures of success. These findings confirm that curriculum reform needs to touch on epistemic structures and assessments in order for education to move towards emancipation. The Tan Malaka-Freire synthesis framework is offered to evaluate policies and formulate the conditions for substantive independence in learning practices in schools and campuses.*

**Keywords:** *Independent Curriculum; Independent Learning; Tan Malaka; Paulo Freire; educational colonialism; human capital.*

### Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisis Kurikulum Merdeka dan gagasan Merdeka Belajar sebagai kontestasi makna “kemerdekaan” dalam pendidikan. Kajian membedakan kemerdekaan prosedural fleksibilitas metode, diferensiasi, dan penyederhanaan konten dengan kemerdekaan substantif dalam pedagogi kritis, yakni pembebasan dari relasi kuasa yang menindas. Penelitian menggunakan studi pustaka dan analisis konseptual-kritis terhadap dokumen kebijakan serta literatur Tan Malaka dan Paulo Freire. Temuan menunjukkan kebaruan Kurikulum Merdeka tampak kuat pada lapisan metodologis, tetapi masih rentan mempertahankan kolonialitas pendidikan pada lapisan struktural. Kerentanan tersebut terlihat pada tiga sumbu: kuasa pengetahuan yang tetap berpijak pada official knowledge, evaluasi yang mempertahankan fungsi seleksi dan mereproduksi hierarki capaian, serta orientasi tujuan yang mudah bergeser menjadi instrumental dan kompatibel dengan logika human capital. Paradoksnya, peserta didik tampak otonom dalam cara belajar, tetapi tetap dikunci oleh ukuran keberhasilan yang komparatif. Temuan ini menegaskan reformasi kurikulum



perlu menyentuh struktur epistemik dan asesmen agar pendidikan bergerak emansipatoris. Kerangka sintesis Tan Malaka–Freire ditawarkan untuk mengevaluasi kebijakan dan merumuskan syarat kemerdekaan substantif dalam praktik pembelajaran di sekolah dan kampus.

**Kata Kunci:** Kurikulum Merdeka; Merdeka Belajar; Tan Malaka; Paulo Freire; kolonialitas pendidikan; *human capital*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The direction of a nation's progress or decline is determined by education. Muhammad Natsir (in Alimin, 1973:77) explained that a country can progress and develop when reforms and improvements are made in education. Education is an integral part of life, life itself being a lifelong educational process (Dzulfikriddin, 2010:22). However, various educational issues arise due to changes, including social and technological changes (Munirah, 2015:233). In fact, the reality of education today is that it must be adapted to the current circumstances.

This is in line with the concept of education that liberates humans. Asy'ari (2004:1) argues that the principle of “independence and education” in Indonesia is not yet truly independent. This is because the knowledge taught cannot liberate students to become economically and socially independent individuals. Education is actually trapped in neo-feudalism by pursuing degrees without actual scientific content. In fact, education in Indonesia, especially formal education, has experienced a kind of ambiguity in its practice. Starting from the “merdeka belajar” (independent learning) campaign to the direction and objectives of education that have begun to abandon the noble values of the Indonesian nation. Education has been the subject of prolonged criticism, given that the narrative that has been constructed does not yet reflect a humanistic education.

The birth of the independent curriculum, which began to be tested in 2020, by the Minister of Education and Culture, Nadiem Makarim. This was motivated by the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted in 2019, which showed that Indonesian students ranked sixth from the bottom. Based on these results, the Minister of Education and Culture initiated a new curriculum concept (Afida, 2021). The independent curriculum has a concept of independence and autonomy for education in Indonesia to determine the best methods to be used during the teaching and learning process.

Tan Malaka's concept of education was essentially born out of his concern for the reality of the grassroots people of the archipelago at that time (1919-1921). His thoughts on

education were outlined in a brochure entitled “SI Semarang dan Onderwijs” (Suwarto, 1999). Through SI, Tan Malaka sought to realize an education that prioritized local wisdom, so that the community would acquire skills that would be useful for their livelihoods, which are indeed very useful in the current era. Tan Malaka's educational ideas were intended to free people from misery, oppression, and ignorance, making life more meaningful for themselves and those around them, without caste or class distinctions.

However, the debate on independent learning has not yet been resolved in terms of the effectiveness of policies or changes in learning tools, but rather touches on a more fundamental problem: the independence of education referred to in policies is often interpreted as pedagogical flexibility, while independence in the tradition of critical pedagogy refers to liberation from oppressive power relations and the reproduction of inequality. In other words, there is a conceptual difference between “independence” as a reform slogan and “independence” as a theoretical category of liberation, which needs to be critically examined so that the discourse does not stop at normative claims.

So far, most studies tend to view the Merdeka Curriculum as a technical innovation in learning, for example through projects, differentiation, and simplification of content, without adequately assessing how the structure of knowledge and evaluation mechanisms can maintain the intellectualistic and individualistic nature of education. As a result, an analytical void emerges: does the Merdeka Curriculum truly shape emancipated learners, or does it merely renew the face of education without changing the logic of selection and instrumentalization that works behind it?

Based on this issue, this article analyzes the Merdeka Curriculum as an arena for contesting the meaning of educational independence using the lens of Tan Malaka and Paulo Freire's transformative pedagogy. The contribution of this article lies in the development of an analytical framework that connects the tradition of Indonesian educational thought (Tan Malaka) and the pedagogy of liberation (Freire) as a test tool for assessing the discourse of “independent learning.” With this framework, the article aims not only to add to normative criticism but also to offer a more systematic theoretical reading of the conditions for emancipatory independent education in context.

## **II. THEORETICAL STUDIES**

The theoretical analysis in this article positions the Merdeka Curriculum as a policy text that is not neutral, but rather an arena for the battle over the meaning of “independence” in education. The curriculum is understood not merely as a technical document, but as a device that regulates what is considered legitimate knowledge, how knowledge is learned, and how student success is defined and selected (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013). From this perspective, reading the Merdeka Curriculum does not stop at changes in the learning format, but assesses the power structures at work behind it (Giroux, 2011).

The concept of “independence” in policy tends to manifest as procedural independence, namely flexibility in learning strategies, differentiation, and simplification of content (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013). However, in the tradition of critical pedagogy, substantive independence refers to the liberation of students from oppressive pedagogical relationships, especially those that treat students as objects of knowledge (Freire, 1970). Freire distinguishes between banking model education, in which knowledge is deposited into learners, and problem-posing dialogical education, which places learners as subjects who read reality, produce meaning, and connect critical reflection with action (Freire, 1970). This theoretical difference forms the basis for assessing whether “independent learning” operates as liberation or merely a change in learning techniques (Mayo, 2004).

This article uses the concept of official knowledge to explain how curricula often legitimize certain knowledge as official knowledge that is validated through standards, learning outcomes, and evaluation tools (Apple, 1993). When official knowledge is more dominant, local knowledge and the social experiences of students risk being positioned as additional contexts rather than equal epistemic sources (Apple, 1993). Within this framework, project-based learning can appear progressive, but it still reproduces old epistemic structures if the project merely repackages official knowledge targets without shifting the locus of knowledge production to a space of critical dialogue (Giroux, 2011).

This article uses reproduction theory to interpret the function of schools as a mechanism that can maintain social hierarchy through assessment, selection, and legitimization of achievement (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). When evaluation functions primarily as a sorting mechanism, learning flexibility can cease to be a pseudo-freedom: learning methods may differ, but success is still determined by uniform, comparative, and

competitive measures (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). At this point, intellectualistic character is understood as a tendency to reduce human qualities to measurable cognitive performance, while individualistic character is understood as a tendency to personalize success as an individual achievement that is competed for, rather than as collective progress oriented towards the public interest (Illich, 1971).

To explain why a reform may appear new but still perpetuates old rationalities, this article uses the perspective of discipline and normalization (Foucault, 1977). In this perspective, schools function as devices that regulate time, behavior, and achievement through standards, monitoring, and evaluation, so that subjects become predictable and easily classified (Foucault, 1977). Coloniality in education in this article is not understood as a literal repetition of the colonial period, but rather as the continuation of modern rationality that disciplines and organizes subjects through mechanisms of standards and selection that are compatible with certain socio-economic interests (Foucault, 1977). This framework is used to examine the possibility that “independent learning” can become a rhetoric of policy legitimization when the power structures of knowledge and the evaluative function of selection remain unchanged (Giroux, 2011).

Tan Malaka is positioned as a tradition of educational criticism in the Indonesian context that rejects education that is detached from the reality of the people (Malaka, 2011). For him, education is related to anti-mystification, namely the dismantling of ideological fog that makes injustice seem normal, as well as the formation of subjects who side with the common people (Malaka, 2011). Tan Malaka's educational orientation emphasizes freedom of thought, connection to concrete life, and social usefulness, so that education is understood as a tool for liberation from misery, oppression, and ignorance (Malaka, 2011). In this article, Tan Malaka provides normative indicators of the “side” and “purpose” of education: whether education strengthens social solidarity and the power of emancipation, or whether it reinforces class divisions and elitism (Malaka, 2011).

Freire is cited as the main reference for assessing the conditions for substantive freedom through the concepts of dialogue, conscientization, and praxis (Freire, 1970). Freedom in Freire's pedagogy is not a static individual condition, but rather a social process that is realized when learners develop critical awareness of structures of oppression and change them through collective action. (Freire, 1970) Therefore, the indicators of freedom in

this article include: whether learning opens up space for problematizing social reality, whether pedagogical relationships position learners as subjects, and whether knowledge leads to transformative praxis that goes beyond mere academic performance (Mayo, 2004).

The theoretical framework of this article synthesizes Tan Malaka and Freire to examine “independent learning” through three main axes of analysis. The first axis is the power of knowledge, namely whether local knowledge and the social experiences of students truly become the center of learning or merely complement official knowledge (Apple, 1993). The second axis is the function of evaluation, namely whether evaluation shifts from a sorting mechanism to strengthening critical reflection, collaboration, and social responsibility, or continues to reproduce a hierarchy of achievement in individual competition (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The third axis is the orientation of educational goals, namely whether education is directed primarily at the instrumentalization of skills for market needs, or at the formation of individuals who are able to read reality critically and build a shared practice of liberation (Giroux, 2011; Freire, 1970). With this synthesis, “independence” is not assessed solely on the basis of the novelty of the learning format, but rather on the shift in power structures and the accompanying orientation toward emancipation (Foucault, 1977).

### **III. RESEARCH METHODS**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research design and critical conceptual analysis to interpret the Merdeka Curriculum as a policy text and arena for contesting the meaning of “independence” in education. The research data consists of primary and secondary sources, including policy documents related to the Merdeka Curriculum and Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn), as well as works and scientific literature representing Tan Malaka's transformative pedagogy and Paulo Freire's pedagogy of liberation, along with critical education theory studies. The analysis procedure was carried out through (1) inventory and selection of literature based on thematic relevance, (2) in-depth reading and recording of key concepts, (3) thematic coding to map three axes of analysis: knowledge power, evaluation/selection function, and educational goal orientation, and (4) interpretive synthesis to draw findings regarding the tendency toward “procedural independence” versus “substantive independence” in the Merdeka Curriculum.

#### **IV. RESEARCH RESULTS**

The controversial Merdeka Curriculum with its “Merdeka Belajar” (Freedom to Learn) content, which was introduced by the Minister of Education and Culture, has opened a new chapter in the contestation of education in Indonesia and has given all elements of society a new homework assignment. The “Merdeka Belajar” content in the new curriculum gives the public hope that they can leave behind the old colonial-style education system. Competencies are prepared more thoroughly in line with the needs of the times. However, “Merdeka Belajar” is actually the latest reincarnation of the Daendels education model and Van Deventer's style of education (Galih, 2021:1). So what is new about it?

This historical foundation then plays an important role because a historical or historical foundation can direct thinking towards the present. As natural sciences develop, supported by new scientific discoveries, education is directed towards worldly life and sourced from worldly circumstances, unlike previous forms of education which were largely oriented towards the world of ideas, heaven and the afterlife. Realism requires practical thinking (Pidarta, 2007: 111-114). According to this school of thought, true knowledge is obtained not only through the senses but also through sensory perception (Mudyahardjo, 2008: 117).

Similar to Paulo Freire, anti-oppression became the echo he offered in education. The picture of oppression of the lower classes and social inequality in Brazil led Freire to give birth to his practice of liberation in educational discourse. For Freire, freedom was a social act, a social process. In the spirit of Marxist revolutionary praxis, Freire developed a pedagogy of the oppressed to form revolutionary subjects (Mayo, 2004), so that in this case, Freire's pedagogy of liberation is not only for the oppressed, but must be forged together.

Based on the historical background of education in Indonesia and Brazil, two great figures, Tan Malaka and Paulo Freire, both adopted transformative pedagogy for educational liberation. Freire started from his observations of poor urban communities in Brazil, where democratic rights were not upheld. Health care was inadequate, there were nutritional deficiencies, poor social conditions, slow intellectual development, and illiteracy. This picture of society gave birth to his theory of education and social justice (Roberts, 2015). Meanwhile, Tan Malaka, with his spirit of Madilog (materialism-dialectics-logic) and his revolutionary spirit, departed from the shackles of imperialism-colonialism.

**Table 1. Transformative Education of Tan Malaka & Paulo Freire**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Tan Malaka</b>	<b>Paulo Freire</b>
Concept of Thought	Education as a tool for liberation and national development	Practice of Liberation
Educational Methods	Constructivism	Critical Thinking
Educational Practice	Transformative	Transformative

Table 1 simplifies the concepts of Tan Malaka and Paulo Freire. Both figures have similar views on liberation. In his concept, Tan Malaka explains that education is used as a tool for liberation and national development. Meanwhile, Freire promotes the Practice of Liberation, in which education is used as a tool for liberation, especially for the urban poor, as a process of finding a better and more independent life.

Based on Tan Malaka and Freire's framework for educational transformation, the Merdeka Curriculum can be read critically. With its emphasis on “Merdeka Belajar” (freedom to learn), the Merdeka Curriculum can be seen as a shift from a content-heavy curriculum to one that emphasizes flexibility, projects, and differentiation. However, critical reading shows that this shift in discourse does not automatically signify the liberation of education in the sense of critical pedagogy, because “independence” at the policy level is more often present as procedural independence, while the structure of knowledge power, selection mechanisms, and educational goal orientation tend to continue to work within the same logic (Freire, 1970). In this framework, “independence” functions as a label for reform that displays methodological novelty, but does not necessarily shift the subject-object relationship in educational practice (Giroux, 2011).

The relationship between power and knowledge is key to assessing whether independence is substantive. In liberating education, learners occupy the position of subjects who are able to read reality, name the world, and test knowledge through critical dialogue (Freire, 1970). In many modern curriculum reforms, project-based activities and differentiated learning can create the impression of participation, but often stop at variations in learning techniques without shifting the locus of knowledge production. Knowledge remains sanctioned by the regime of “official knowledge” that sets standards of competence, forms of success, and horizons of truth, while local experiences, the social language of citizens, and the concrete problems of the community are often placed in a peripheral context



rather than at the epistemic center (Apple, 1993). As a result, projects do not always become spaces for awareness, but can instead become spaces for the reproduction of dominant knowledge in a more attractive format (Mayo, 2004).

The evaluation and selection mechanisms show a more pronounced continuity. Even though learning methods have become more varied, assessment still tends to function as a sorting machine that provides academic legitimacy and produces a hierarchy of achievement (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In these circumstances, learning freedom experiences a paradox: learners are given autonomy in their methods, but are still “judged” by measures that normalize competition and focus success on individual performance (Apple, 1993). An intellectualistic character emerges when knowledge is reduced to measurable indicators of achievement that are easily compared across individuals, thereby narrowing human quality down to scores, certificates, and portfolios. (Illich, 1971) The individualistic character is reinforced when success is personalized as an individual achievement that is competed for, rather than as collective progress linked to social responsibility (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

At the goal level, “independence” has the potential to operate as a management technology that is compatible with human capital orientation. Education is encouraged to produce adaptive, productive, and work-ready subjects; freedom is understood as the capacity to choose learning paths that are more “fit” for market needs (Giroux, 2011). This rationality does not demand the dismantling of structures of injustice, but rather the adjustment of individuals to existing structures. From the perspective of modern discipline, schools function as normalization devices that regulate behavior, time, and achievement through standards and assessments, so that “freedom” can exist within boundaries that do not disrupt the order. (Foucault, 1977) Thus, the new curriculum policy can present an emancipatory face, but at the same time maintain the disciplinary and selective functions of education.

In Tan Malaka's view, independent education stems from the principles of anti-mystification and anti-colonialism, which is to dispel the ideological fog that makes injustice seem natural and to direct education towards supporting the common people (Malaka, 2011). The measure of independence is not the flexibility of teaching tools, but rather the ability of education to shape critical awareness, public virtue, and the courage to side with the common people in national development (Malaka, 2011). If learning independence is more prominent as a strategy for strengthening individual competencies, including competencies that are

compatible with industry without the practice of social advocacy, then such independence moves into the realm of technique, not transformation (Malaka, 2011).

Freire clarifies this problem through the concept of liberation pedagogy, which demands conscientization and praxis (Freire, 1970). Liberating education is not enough to make students active; it must also transform the pedagogical relationship from a depository relationship to a dialogical relationship that builds historical subjects—subjects capable of connecting knowledge with social action to change conditions of oppression (Freire, 1970). When learning projects are not directed towards a critical reading of social structures and do not result in social praxis, they tend to become “pedagogical activism” without political-ethical consequences, that is, activities that are lively but safe for the structure (Mayo, 2004). It is at this point that “independence” has the potential to become rhetoric that masks the reproduction of inequality: students appear to be independent in the classroom, but remain bound by the mechanisms of selection and instrumental orientation that govern their future.

The continuity of colonialism in education is not a literal repetition of the Daendels or Van Deventer era, but rather a continuation of modern rationality that uses education to regulate the population, manage the workforce, and shape predictable subjects through standards (Foucault, 1977). Within this framework, the Merdeka Curriculum can be understood as a progressive reform at the methodological level, but remains colonial at the structural level when knowledge remains centralized, assessment remains selective, and objectives remain instrumental (Apple, 1993; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Consequently, learning independence appears as procedural independence that increases learning flexibility, but has not yet become substantive independence that frees subjects from oppressive power relations and reproduces injustice (Freire, 1970).

In the practice of populist education, Tan Malaka emphasized learning that gave children space to actively construct knowledge through experiences and activities that were close to their lives, so that his approach intersected with the principles of constructivist learning (Susanto, 2014; Malaka, 2011). This pedagogical pattern is evident in the emphasis on dialogue, the use of assumptions/analogies, and certain mnemonic strategies to aid conceptual understanding, with the main orientation being the emancipation of kromo children from educational backwardness (Malaka, 2011). Meanwhile, Freire places education as a problem-posing dialogical process, which is developing critical thinking skills through

the direct involvement of students in the social issues they experience, so that learning becomes a means of forming critical awareness (Freire, 1970; Mayo, 2004). Within this framework, Tan Malaka and Freire both view education as an emancipatory praxis that rejects the reduction of education to the mere transmission of knowledge, but rather as an effort to humanize humans through the formation of subjects who are aware of reality and capable of acting to change it (Freire, 1970; Malaka, 2011). This transformative orientation presupposes a humanism that believes in the progressive capacity of humans to develop and overcome structures of oppression, so that education is positioned as a work of liberation, not merely a technical work of learning (Leivas, 2019).

The introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum with its “Merdeka Belajar” (Freedom to Learn) component marks a new chapter in the contestation of education policy in Indonesia, particularly because it offers a shift from the old learning model, which was considered content-heavy, to a more flexible and contextual approach (Dikdasmen, 2022). In the policy narrative, the Merdeka Curriculum is linked to strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile through project-based learning, an emphasis on essential material for deeper literacy and numeracy, and differentiated learning according to the context and needs of students (Dikdasmen, 2022). However, critical discussions show that the novelty of the policy does not automatically correlate with the liberation of education, because “independence” often appears as procedural freedom in methods and tools without shifting the structure of knowledge power, evaluation selection mechanisms, and educational goal orientation (Freire, 1970).

Conceptually, independence in critical pedagogy does not stop at flexibility in learning or simplification of content, but rather liberation from pedagogical power relations that make students objects of knowledge (Freire, 1970). Within this framework, substantive independence is marked by a shift in educational relations towards problem-posing dialogical learning, in which learners are able to read reality, name social issues, and connect knowledge with the praxis of change (Freire, 1970). Therefore, changes in learning formats, such as projects and differentiation, need to be examined further: do they shift the locus of knowledge production and expand critical thinking, or do they merely modify learning techniques without changing the epistemic authority and social function of schools (Giroux, 2011).

This is where the issue of knowledge power arises. Modern curriculum reform typically remains rooted in official knowledge that is validated through competency standards, learning outcomes, and evaluation indicators, so that local experiences and knowledge often serve as contextual supplements rather than as equal epistemic sources (Apple, 1993). When learning projects are only directed at products or performance, without changing the position of learners as subjects of knowledge who are capable of examining the social structures that surround their lives, seemingly active participation risks becoming pseudo-participation (Mayo, 2004). Thus, methodological innovation can remain compatible with old power structures, because the curriculum still determines what is worth knowing and how that knowledge is assessed (Apple, 1993).

The second, more decisive issue is the architecture of evaluation. Curriculum changes often do not alter the selection function of assessment, which acts as a mechanism for sorting achievement and social legitimacy, so that learning flexibility remains within the limits determined by uniform and comparative measures of success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In this context, intellectualistic tendencies emerge when the quality of students is reduced to measurable cognitive performance, while individualistic tendencies emerge when success is personalized as an individual achievement that is competed for, rather than collective progress oriented towards social responsibility (Illich, 1971). Paradoxically, students can be “liberated” in their learning methods, but remain “locked” in a logic of selection that reproduces the hierarchy of achievement (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

The third issue relates to the orientation of educational goals. In many reform contexts, education is easily drawn into an instrumentalist orientation that prepares individuals to be adaptive, productive, and compatible with the needs of industry, so that “independence” is understood as the ability to choose a learning path for the sake of competency efficiency (Giroux, 2011). If the instrumental orientation strengthens, learning freedom tends to be limited to procedural freedom that is safe for the structure, rather than substantive freedom that demands an understanding of injustice and the praxis of social change (Foucault, 1977). Therefore, criticism of the Merdeka Curriculum should not be directed at rejecting new methods, but at the internal contradiction between the narrative of human formation (character and nationality) and the function of human production (performance, competitiveness, and achievement classification) (Giroux, 2011).

Education must be rooted in Indonesian culture, which continues to be explored and conveyed in Indonesian, where the principle of democracy is the philosophical foundation of educational practices in line with the identity of the Indonesian people. Therefore, education cannot be separated from reality as the center of the concept of education, so that education should prioritize local wisdom. (Tan Malaka, 2011:27). This is to hone noble values such as trust, so that it can develop into a social being. (Patrick Farren, 2015: 56). Education in Indonesia today refers to the education system, namely the National Education System, which is an education system that brings progress and development to the nation and responds to the challenges of changing times. As stated in the vision and mission of the National Education System as outlined in Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System (hereinafter referred to as the National Education System Law):

“The realization of an education system as a strong and authoritative social institution to empower all Indonesian citizens to develop into quality individuals who are capable and proactive in responding to the challenges of an ever-changing era.”

The reading of “colonialism” in this discussion is not understood as a literal repetition of the Daendels or Van Deventer era, but rather as the coloniality of education in the form of modern rationality that normalizes subjects through standards, discipline, and selection (Foucault, 1977). This is where Galih's criticism, which refers to “independent learning” as the reincarnation of colonial education patterns, becomes relevant as a catalyst for analysis, because it draws attention to the continuity of the logic of subject management through schools even though the language of policy has changed (Galih, 2021). In fact, the republic's initial acknowledgment of the continuity of the colonial education system, as quoted by Galih from news reports in the 1950s, can be read as a historical context that educational reform often moves slowly at the structural level, even if it changes at the documentary level (Galih, 2021).

The historical basis is also important because changes in education always bring with them a certain legacy of perspectives on knowledge and the purpose of school (Pidarta, 2007). In the tradition of educational realism, knowledge is directed towards the real world and is considered to originate from the reality of the world, thus demanding practical thinking and attention to empirical experience (Pidarta, 2007). However, true knowledge is not only produced by perception, but also by perception and the process of interpreting experience, so

that education cannot be reduced to mere technical skills training (Mudyahardjo, 2008). Therefore, when the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the essentialization of material and projects, the question is not simply “more practical or not,” but whether these practices expand critical awareness and social responsibility or accelerate the instrumentalization of knowledge for the sake of performance (Giroux, 2011).

Within the framework of emancipatory criticism, Tan Malaka offers an anti-colonial educational orientation based on materialism as a call for anti-mystification, namely an effort to dispel the ideological fog that makes injustice seem normal (Malaka, 2011). For Tan Malaka, education moves systematically from cognitive and affective preparation to the formation of virtuous leaders who side with the common people as part of the national liberation project (Malaka, 2011). Meanwhile, Freire places freedom as a social action and social process, with the pedagogy of the oppressed emphasizing dialogue and problem-posing methods to build critical consciousness and praxis of change (Freire, 1970). In synthesizing the two, transformative education is not merely about making students active, but about making them historical subjects who are able to read the reality of oppression and take collective action to change it (Mayo, 2004).

With this lens, criticism of the Merdeka Curriculum gains analytical ground: freedom of learning risks becoming pseudo-freedom when projects and differentiation do not transfer knowledge power, when assessments continue to sort and reproduce hierarchies, and when educational goals tend to shift toward producing subjects compatible with industrial logic. (Apple, 1993; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Giroux, 2011). Under such conditions, education can become trapped in the creation of “human products” that are assessed based on certain performance standards, while the function of liberating humanity and building a new culture that is aware of reality becomes secondary (Freire, 1970; Leivas, 2019). Illich's criticism of modern institutions also reminds us that dignity, independence, and creative endeavors are easily reduced to “institutional output” when education relies too much on institutional mechanisms and certification, rather than on the formation of citizens' critical faculties (Illich, 1998).

Ultimately, this discussion positions “Merdeka Belajar” as an arena for a battle of meanings: whether it will become a path to emancipation or merely a procedural reform that perpetuates the colonality of education in a more subtle form (Foucault, 1977). At the

normative policy level, national education is directed at empowering citizens to proactively respond to the challenges of the times, as stipulated in the National Education System Law (Law No. 20 of 2003). However, at the practical level, achieving this goal requires structural changes, especially in the power of knowledge and evaluation, so that education does not stop at technical modernization but truly becomes a tool for liberating humans to deal with reality critically and creatively (Freire, 1970; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013).

## V. CONCLUSION

The Merdeka Curriculum with its Merdeka Belajar (Independent Learning) content presents innovations, especially at the methodological level, through flexibility, differentiation, and project-based learning. However, these innovations do not automatically bring about substantive independence in the sense of emancipatory pedagogy. Synthesizing the thoughts of Tan Malaka and Paulo Freire, this study reveals a paradox: students appear to be autonomous in their learning methods, but they are still potentially constrained by the power structure of knowledge that relies on official knowledge, by evaluations that maintain the function of selection and reproduction of achievement hierarchies, and by educational goals that are prone to instrumentalism and compatible with the logic of human capital. Therefore, learning independence risks remaining procedural independence if reforms do not touch on shifting the locus of knowledge production, changing the function of assessment from a sorting mechanism to strengthening critical-collaborative reflection, and strengthening learning practices that favor social liberation.

## REFERENCES

- Abidin, N.F. (2016). Membebaskan kaum kromo: pemikiran pendidikan tan malaka. Seminar Nasional 71 Tahun Kemerdekaan Indonesia. Universitas Andalas.
- Alimin, S. (1973). *Capita Selecta*. Jakarta: Bulan Bintang.
- Apple, M. W. (1993). Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age. Routledge. [https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780203814383/official-knowledge-michael-apple?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780203814383/official-knowledge-michael-apple?utm_source=chatgpt.com)
- Beckett, Kelvin Stewart. (2013). Paulo Freire and the concept of education. Educational Philosophy and Theory. 45(1). 49-62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2012.715385>

- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London; Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Dzulfikriddin, M. (2010). *Mohammad Natsir dalam Sejarah Politik Indonesia: Peran dan Jasa Mohammad Natsir dalam Dua Orde Indonesia*. Bandung : Mizan Pustaka
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Pantheon.
- Freire, Paulo. (1985). *Pendidikan Kaum Tertindas*. Terjemahan oleh Utomo Dananjay et al. Jakarta: LP3ES.
- Giroux, H. A. (2011). *On Critical Pedagogy*. Bloomsbury.
- Illich, I, Freire, P., et al. (1999). *Menggugat Pendidikan*, (terj.) Omi Intan Naomi. Yogyakarta : Pustaka Pelajar.
- Jatnika, Asep Wawan; Epin Saepudin; Chairil Nur Siregar. 2019. Kampus sebagai miniatur keindonesiaan. *Jurnal Citizenship: Media Publikasi Pendidikan Pancasila dan Kewarganegaraan*. 2(1). 8–15. doi:10.12928/citizenship.v2i1.15937.
- Jiwandono, Ilham Syahrul & Iswahyu Nurbeni. 2019. Persepsi Mahasiswa Terhadap Fungsi Pancasila Sebagai Weltanschauung dalam Upaya Mengatasi Merosotnya Nilai Kebangsaan. *ELSE (Elementary School Education Journal): Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran Sekolah Dasar*. 3(2). 35–42. doi:10.30651/else.v3i2.3166.
- Leivas, Monique. (2019). From the body to the city: participatory action research with social cartography for transformative education and global citizenship. *Education Action Research*. 27(1). 40-56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2018.1519453>
- Malaka, Tan. (2011). *Serikat Islam Semarang dan Onderwijs*. Jakarta: Pustaka Kaji.
- Malaka, Tan. (1974). *Madilog (Materialisme, Dialektika, Logika)*. Jakarta: Lembaga Pengembangan Masyarakat.
- Mayo, P. (2004). *Liberating praxis: Paulo Freire's legacy for radical education and politics*. West-port, CT: Praeger.
- Munirah. (2015). *Pengembangan Keterampilan Menulis Paragraf*. Yogyakarta: Deepublish.
- Ornstein, Allan C., dan Francis P. Hunkins. 2013. *Curriculum: Foundations, Principles, and Issues*. Boston: Pearson.
- Pidarta, Made. 2007. *Landasan Kependidikan: Stimulus Ilmu Pendidikan Bercorak Indonesia*. Jakarta: Rineka Cipta.



- Rahmawati, Citra Ayu, Farihatu Sa'adah, Muhammad Faishal Nawwaf, Nandita Rizkina Azzahra, Sahrul Mubarak, Dadi Mulyadi Nugraha, & Yadi Ruyadi. 2023. Toleransi Beragama di Perguruan Tinggi. *Toleransi: Media Ilmiah Komunikasi Umat Beragama*. 15(1). 29–38. doi:10.24014/trs.v15i1.24507.
- Saepudin, Epin & Asep Wawan Jatnika. 2021. Interkoneksi Mata Kuliah Pendidikan Kewarganegaraan dengan Bahasa Indonesia dalam Membangun Pemahaman Multikultural Generasi Digital. *Jurnal Sosioteknologi*. 20(2). 225–237. doi:10.5614/sostek.itbj.2021.20.2.8.
- Smiley, V. (1974). Chicago women's liberation school. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*. 6(3). 18-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1974.10568653>
- Su, Galih Nugraha. (2021). *Pendidikan yang Menjajah*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Osiris.
- Suwarto. (1999). *Perilaku Keorganisasian*. Yogyakarta: Universitas Atma Jaya.