



Reconsidering the Freedom to Learn Curriculum in Indonesia: Paulo Freire's Perspective

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to analyze the implementation of the policy related to Freedom to Learn (*Merdeka Belajar*) Curriculum in Indonesia from the perspective of Paulo Freire's thinking. This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) strategy as part of a qualitative methodology. This strategy was used in order to obtain a thorough and in-depth comprehension of the study findings, methodology, and trends published between 2019 and 2025, I collected the documents consist of papers, books, and the policy from Ministry of Education and culture Indonesia and analyze it. The result of this study is freedom to learn curriculum some area adopted the Freire's ide. The most prominent in this new concept is freedom, means students free to search any resource for increase their skill and competences. Freire's argued students and teachers need dialogues in the learning process, he was criticism the banking education. Education was not like banking system that students only receipt the material and tested in the end of examination by memorizing. This study perhaps contributes to the advancement of Indonesian education and evaluate the freedom to learn curriculum.

Keywords: *Freedom to learn, Curriculum, and Paulo Freire*

Introduction

The changing of politic, economic, social and technology make the changing of education. In recent years, the Indonesia education quality has not progress in Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) ranking. However, in recent years, the quality of education in Indonesia has encountered significant issues, as evidenced by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) findings. According to the most recent PISA 2022 results released in 2023, Indonesia placed approximately 69th out of 80 participating nations, showing that its global standing remains relatively low (OECD, 2023; GoodStats, 2024). Although Indonesia increased its ranking by roughly 5-6 positions from PISA 2018, this improvement was not accompanied by a considerable increase in student performance scores.

In light of this phenomenon, Indonesia aims to close the educational gap with other countries. One way to do this is through a new curriculum. The purpose of new curriculum reform is to students and teachers independently learning. According to Morris (2020)

Independent refers to the concept of independence in acquiring a source of learning, which allows students to learn directly from their actual experiences outside of the classroom. In other words, student's freedom to choose what they want to learn based on their competency.

Additionally, covid-19 has hit Indonesia since 2020, effect to every sector such as economic, industry, and educational. The government through Ministry of Education has policy learning from home both of teachers and students. Based on these case, Indonesia wants to solve these problems, such as to improve PISA score, the learning more useful for students, education more concerned with the essence of education and students freedom to design what they want to learn and improve educational quality and build skilled yet agile graduate, in the end of December 2019, Indonesia Ministry of Education (2019) had launched the new policy of curriculum namely *Merdeka Belajar dan Kampus Merdeka* (Freedom to Learn and Campus Independent). In this program has four program priorities: First, National Standardized School Examination (*Ujian Sekolah Berbasis Nasional/USBN*). Second, The removal of National examination (*Ujian Nasional/UN*). Third, The simplification of Lesson plan and fourth, The regulation of new students (Kemendikbud, 2019). And the other policy is both teacher and student's freedom learning from any resources and based on students' skill. The main purpose of freedom to learn curriculum is students do the independent

These curricula identical with the Paulo Freire's thought. The philosophy Paulo Freire was a philosophy and politician. This paper shows us the critical analysis of Paulo Freire's philosophy on contemporary education. Freire wanted a radical change in the aims of education. Freire used the term "banking education" to criticize the traditional methods of education. Why used this term, because students did not have opportunity to develop their ability. The teacher only transformed the curriculum to the students.

Even though Freire's concept and idea were developed many years ago, they can still be applied today. His ideas about "progressive" teachers and problem-solving approaches provide an alternative methodology for contexts dominated by traditional approaches, such as "banking education."

Freire contributed in pedagogy as well as the psychology of learning and teaching. Freire defined traditional education as "banking," or the transfer of fixed knowledge into a person's head. The learner is thought to be a passive receiver of this knowledge. "The banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings" (Freire, 1972, p. 47). The role educator's role is to regulate the way world "enter into" the students. (Freire, 1972, p. 49). Because of the learners have potential active, the teachers should begin with problem-solving approach in the learning process. This study will give the contribution for the education system and new curriculum in Indonesia according on Paulo Freire's criticism and thought.

Previous study has examined the merdeka curriculum from the perspective of implementasion (wahyudi et.al, 2024), teacher readiness (Sutinah et, al. 2024) and how the effectiveness of teaching methods (Nurfadila et.al, 2023). The unique aspect of this study is that it examines the connection between the "Merdeka" curriculum policy and the concept of liberating education developed by Paulo Freire. This is why this study is important to investigate, with the hope of contributing to academic knowledge in the field of curriculum studies.

Biography of Paulo Freire

Paulo Reglus Neves Freire was born in Brazil, in Recife, Pernambuco, on September 19th, 1921. Since childhood he Respect, dialogue, democracy, the search for coherence, and the dialectic between freedom and authority have permeated his life since childhood. Paulo Freire's philosophy on contemporary education. Freire want a radical change in the aims of education. Freire used the term "banking education" to criticize the traditional methods of

education. Why used this term, because students did not have opportunity to develop their ability. The teacher only transformed the curriculum to the students. Bank education means the teachers described education as banking, where teachers deposited information in their students instead of drawing knowledge out of them or creating inquisitive beings that sought knowledge. Students become passive, learners who accept the passive role in the learning process encourage more manipulation to be practiced on them.

Paulo Freire was one of the most influential educators of the twentieth century. Freire's work has been widely read outside of the field in which he is best known. His writings, as a founding figure of critical pedagogy, have also been engaged by scholars in sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, philosophy, theology, women's studies, counseling, social work, prison and rehabilitation studies, cultural studies, indigenous studies, peace studies, ecology, and other fields (Roberts, 2015). After he was famous in the education field, Freire was invited to Harvard University after gaining international attention for his innovative approach to adult literacy education

Banking Education as Idea of Paulo Freire's

Paulo Freire's was a philosopher contemporary education from Brazil. Freire wants a radical change in the aims of education. Freire used the term "banking education" to criticize the traditional methods of education. Why used this term, because students did not have opportunity to develop their ability. The teacher only transformed the curriculum to the students.

Regarding Freire's (1972) students learn the meaning of words by inquiring into the world. This inquiring process is regarded as a lively dialogue between people rather than an individual activity. This concept called education as dialogue. Learning is viewed as a social activity in which the process of dialogue demonstrates that there is no fixed outcome, that everyone involved (including the teacher) is open to new ideas and insights, and that everyone is willing to change their minds. In Freire's educational method, the concept of dialogue is critical (Veugelers, 2017).

Banking education and pedagogical authoritarianism also dismiss popular knowledges in the plural, creating a suffocating tension between popular and scientific knowledge for Freire and ultimately undermining the possibility of dialogical democracy by encouraging student passivity (Freire, 2021). The banking concept of education is Freire's radical critique of dominant educational policies. "Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality"

Furthermore, Freire labeled as anti-dialogical teachers those whose teaching approach is based on memorization. By taking a balanced approach to the issue, he attempts to reconcile freedom and authority. One of Freire's most interesting arguments is his search for a balance that respects both freedom and authority (Embark Saleh, 2013).

Freire's was published first book "Education: The Practice of Freedom" in 1976. In this book he wrote that education cannot force students to accept information. This activity like banking system that students only save the knowledge in their mind, do not make students criticism. Next, when *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published in English in 1970 it had a dramatic and almost immediate impact on the educational world. This famous text was the first of Freire's books to find a wide Western audience (Cookson & Stirk, 2019).

Dialog Problem-Posing Approach (a critical pedagogy to education)

Freire's approach is based on student's prior knowledge and daily experiences to empower them to construct their own knowledge. Dialog-posing approach utilized the

student's active participation and encourage both teacher and students develop their critical attitude. Freire argued problematizing knowledge is the best way to maintain reflective and meaningful communication inside classroom (Freire, 1974).

During in this methodology there are three interrelated stages in the Freire's methodology: First, "Generating themes" it means the teacher gives question to the students and ask encourage them to put forward their ideas freely. The role of teachers in this stage encourages all students to participate, cooperative skills and discuss. Freire's method of teaching and learning describes a class as a place to look for knowledge, not transmitted. In this stage, students participatory, cooperation skills and their self-confidence could be enhanced. Freire's argued that teaching learning through problem-solving will increase the student criticism. During problem solving will develop student's deep learning and students' discussion between teachers and students.

Research Methodology

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) strategy as part of a qualitative methodology. This strategy was used in order to obtain a thorough and in-depth comprehension of the study findings, methodology, and trends published between 2019 and 2025. This work attempts to track the development of scholarly discourse on educational notions objectively and methodically through a systematic review.

Analysing several scientific publications from respectable national and international journals was part of the data collecting procedure. The researcher set "freedom to learn," "independent curriculum," and "Paulo Freire" as the main search criteria in order to guarantee consistency and accuracy in data screening. The purpose of this stage was to make sure that the evaluated material was highly relevant to the study's philosophical and practical emphasis.

All collected data was then filtered using stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria to guarantee that the findings were original and high-quality. Thematic data analysis was used to synthesise Paulo Freire's concepts in relation to the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation in Indonesia. The study's methodical approach is intended to yield valid theoretical contributions as well as a complete assessment of the progress of the autonomous education paradigm over the last few years.

Result and Discussion

Freedom to Learn (Merdeka Belajar) Curriculum

Freedom to learn (*merdeka Belajar*) is current educational program launched by Indonesian Minister of Education and culture, Nadiem Anwar Makarim (Christanti & Sukoco, 2022). The educational policy which named as Freedom to learn curriculum has the purpose to give the schools and teacher autonomy and responsibility to create a learning environment without pressure and limits. So, the students can be more innovative and can develop good critical thinking (Kemendikbud, 2019; Evi Hasim, 2020; Mauzdati, 2020).

According to ministry of education (2019), the essence of freedom to learn is to unlock the full potential both of teachers and students to innovative and improve their learning quality independently. Freedom to learn can be embodied with flexibility, therefore learning culture can be formulated and will not restrict or force them to learn, but instead can be created according to their needs (Pakaya & Damopolii, 2022).

The purpose of learning to free curriculum is implementation to accelerate the achievement of the national goals of education. It's to improve the quality of Indonesia human resources who have excellent and competitiveness compared to other countries. The quality of excellent and competitive human embodied in good students characters and have higher level thinking specially in literation and numeration (Nurbani, 2020).

The concept of freedom to learn similar with the Indonesian education philosophy Ki Hajar Dewantoro: “Where there is freedom must be strong discipline. The true discipline is self-discipline, we oblige our self with hard as we can and the approved rules must exist in an independent atmosphere” (Nurbani, 2020: 30). The essence of learning freedom is freedom from oppression and exploitation of students in gaining knowledge and experience that have an impact on changing behavior to form a complete personality. To improve educational quality, freedom to learn must be inspired to become a spirit and interpreted in educational policies. Furthermore, the nature of independent learning must be understood by the Indonesian government and people. The concept of education desired by the Indonesian people can be used to deduce the nature of independent learning (Pangestu et al., 2021).

The implementation of freedom to learn in 34 provinces and 514 cities, below:

PAUD/Kindergarten	SD (Primary)	SMP (Junior high School)	SMA (Senior High School)	SLB (Extraordinary School)	SMK (Vocation School)
24.159	84.034	18.938	6.448	709	6.863
RA	MI	MTs	MA	MAK	SKB/PKBM
62	215	108	64	0	1665

Table of the schools that implement freedom to learn curriculum. (source: <https://kurikulum.gtk.kemdikbud.go.id/>)

Paulo Freire’s theory in the Freedom to Learn Curriculum

One of the fourth policy in the beginning of freedom to learn are deleted the national examination. So, the examination handle by school called school examination national standard. Its means student’s competency test can be done with a written test or a more comprehensive assessment. Teachers are more flexible in assessing students at the end of the year. The essential of learning is the learning process, not the goal of point result in the end of examination. If the goal of learning is students can answer the paper examination will be like the banking of education.

Freire (1974) claims that banking education involves the manipulation of pupils, compelling them to adhere to the objectives of the dominant elite who seek to maintain their power. In connection with evaluation, Saleh (2013) stated that, according to Freire's theory, evaluation is an integral aspect of the learning process. Nonetheless, teachers employ manipulative methods to silence positive diversity and criticism in banking education assessments. Freire rejected these techniques because of their subjective nature, which could lead to biased judgments. He recommended modifying these systems so that critical teachers may evaluate students with a sense of serving freedom rather than domestication. Then, in Freirean pedagogy, students are taught to participate in their own historical endeavors by reconstructing and modifying the world around them (Rossatto 2005). According to the Ministry of Education's new policy, students and teachers are seen as subjects in the learning process, and they work together (Mauizdati, 2020).

The aim of Freedom to Learn curriculum are: simple and deep, freedom, and relevant and interactive. The first purpose simple and deep means the curriculum will focus on developing the competence of learners in its phase. So, that the learning becomes more in-depth, meaningful, not rushed and fun. The goal of education was not the achieving more subject but more in-depth. On that account, teachers teach in the classroom will focus in understanding the topics deeply.

The second purpose of freedom to learn curriculum is freedom. The meaning of “freedom” means both students can choose the subject based on their competent. And for teachers, free to choose anything resource that can help for teachers teaching learning. The example of meaning freedom in the students is there is no specialization program in senior high school. The students choose the subject based on their interest, talent and aspiration. For the teachers teach according to the level of achievement and students’ development. And for the schools has an authority to develop and manage the curriculum and learning according to the characteristic’s education units and students.

To Freire (1985) ‘conscientization’ is a basic dimension of reflective action which should “continue whenever and wherever the transformed reality assumes a new face” According to Freire method, the teacher is not only an information provider, but also an active participant in discussions with students. Teachers also need to be aware of the characteristics of critically transitive consciousness as described by Freire (1973):

1. Depth in the interpretation of the problems;
2. Substitution of casual principles for magical explanations;
3. Testing of one’s findings by openness to revision;
4. Avoiding distortion when perceived problems and pre-conceived notions when analyzing them;
5. Refusing to transfer responsibility;
6. Rejecting passive positions;
7. Soundness of argumentation;
8. Practicing dialogues rather than polemics;
9. The receptivity to the new for reason beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old only because it is old;
10. And accepting what is valid in both old and new (Freire ,1973: 18)

The ministry of education was launched Freedom to learn platform. In this platform, the ministry of education had launch 21st platform. The history of Indonesia curriculum has changing time by time. Since 1945, 11 times curriculum was changing (Marisa, 2021). In this indicate, the changing curriculum because of the changing the world. In the Learn of Freedom (<https://merdekabelajar.kemdikbud.go.id/>), focus on 21 topics are:

1. Freedom to learn 1: National Assessment
2. Freedom to learn 2: Freedom campus
3. Freedom to learn 3: Distribution and use of BOS funds
4. Freedom to learn 4: Movement organization Programs
5. Freedom to learn 5: Movement Teacher
6. Freedom to learn 6: Fund transformation to university
7. Freedom to learn 7: School movement program
8. Freedom to learn 8: Excellent School Vocation
9. Freedom to learn 9: School insurance and living expenses
10. Freedom to learn 10: Expansion of the scholarship program (higher education)
11. Freedom to learn 11: Vocation Freedom Campus
12. Freedom to learn 12: Shopping Safety school with *SIPlah*
13. Freedom to learn 13: Culture freedom with the *Indonesiana Channel*
14. Freedom to learn 14: Freedom Campus from the sexual violence
15. Freedom to learn 15: Freedom Curriculum and teaching freedom platform
16. Freedom to learn 16: Acceleration and increasing funding for Child and equality education
17. Freedom to learn 17: Revitalization for local language
18. Freedom to learn 18: Freedom culture with *Indonesiana* funding.
19. Freedom to learn 19: Report for Education Indonesia

20. Freedom to learn 20: Teaching practitioner

21. Freedom to learn 21: College Endowment

From this policy showed that the education determined the freedom learning, respect the culture, and language. The critical thinking from Freire's, he argued that school is not preparation for job but for contextual learning in the students live. Culture, literacy, and education, according to Freire, are the terrains on which individuals gain consciousness of their position and a willingness to fight for dignity, social justice, and freedom. For Freire, culture was a battlefield, a site of conflict, and he recognized, as Gramsci did, that every relationship of dominance was pedagogic and occurred among the various forces of which it was composed (Murphy & Carroll, 2021). Freire idea that practice of freedom with dialogue (Farias & Lopes, 2021).

The third purpose of freedom to learn curriculum is relevance and interactivity. Learning through project activities provide students with broader possibilities to directly actively examine current concerns such as environmental, health, and more to enhance the character development and competence of Pancasila students' profiles.

The goal of interactive is dialogues between students and teachers. The dialogues open by the problem solving in the classroom. This concept appropriate with the Paulo Freire's idea. Freire's educational theory is founded on a critical and liberating dialogue between teacher and learner, which encourages both responsibility and autonomy. This results in an awareness for the dialectical character of information and intellect, which leads to the realization of humanity (Embark Saleh, 2013).

In the Merdeka curriculum included a policy that allowed students at higher levels to choose their skill and potential in the third year. Students are free to choose another department within the same institute or a separate department. This approach was democratic, which is consistent with Freire's remark that introducing democratic education into schools necessitates internalizing concepts of openness, confidence, trustfulness, cooperation, and willingness, but actual responsibility comes before these concepts. Teachers and students must be committed to implementing democratic education. Teachers should keep their expertise up to date, as new topics are expected to emerge throughout conversations (Embark Saleh, 2013).

Relevant in the freedom to learn means the curriculum that students learn suitable with their live and their situation. Freire's criticism related students concrete learn with their live.

“Why not discuss with the students the concrete reality of their lives and that aggressive reality in which violence is permanent and where people are much more familiar with death than with life? Why not establish an "intimate" connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals?”(Freire, 1998).

According to Freire, learners have to understand their own reality as part of their learning process (Gerhardt, 2000). By new concept of Indonesian curriculum wish the teachers not only teach the material with the same method previous approach. There must be a different in the teaching and learning. According to Freire's idea which emphasizes that indept material teaching and the content of learning suitable to students live. Because students live is part of the society. The reason changing the curriculum the government wants to bring the education become agent social change. Based on Gadotti (1995. p.70) “The transformation of education cannot take place before the transformation of society, but this transformation of society needs education”. If we want to change the society change the education system, and vice versa.

Several fundamental ideas of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy are reflected in the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation in Indonesia, especially the focus on student-centered

learning and the growth of critical consciousness. By encouraging adaptability, contextual learning, and the incorporation of contemporary issues into classroom activities, the curriculum enables students to actively create knowledge based on their own social realities. This is consistent with Freire's opposition to the "banking model" of education, which views students as passive consumers of information. Rather, the Merdeka Curriculum promotes dialogical learning, in which educators take on the role of facilitators, helping students to critically interact, reflect, and ask questions about their surroundings. In this way, education is a transforming process that enables students to become engaged members of society rather than just a means of imparting knowledge.

Furthermore, the Merdeka Curriculum promotes the concept of education as an instrument for social transformation, which is important to Freire's ideology. By stressing project-based learning and the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*, the curriculum aims to foster not just cognitive skills but also social awareness, ethical values, and a sense of responsibility for community development. This approach aligns with Freire's belief that education should prepare students to confront injustice and contribute to a more just society. As a result, the convergence of the Merdeka Curriculum and Freirean ideas demonstrates a paradigm shift in Indonesian education from a rigorous, content-oriented system to a more emancipatory and reflective learning process that places students as change agents in their social settings.

Despite this strong conceptual alignment, the Merdeka Curriculum does not yet fully translate Freirean principles into classroom reality. In practice, many aspects of teaching and learning still reflect traditional patterns, where teachers act more as policy implementers than as transformative and dialogical partners (Situmorang & Pandiangan, 2025; Choirunnisa & Ibrahim, 2025). As a result, the space for genuine dialogue and critical engagement remains limited.

In this context, the idea of "freedom" within the Merdeka Curriculum can sometimes become superficial. Rather than representing a deeper transformation of the learning process, freedom is often reduced to technical flexibility, such as choosing learning resources or assessment formats, without challenging the underlying power relations in education. From a Freirean perspective, however, freedom is not simply about flexibility, but about developing critical awareness and the ability to question and transform reality. Without this dimension, the curriculum risks reproducing a softer version of the banking model of education, even if it appears more modern and student-centered.

At the same time, broader structural and pedagogical constraints continue to shape how the curriculum is implemented. Differences in teacher readiness, unequal access to resources, and institutional limitations all affect the extent to which critical pedagogy can be practiced. This limitation is also reflected in assessment practices within the Merdeka Curriculum. Safrudin (2026) argues that although assessment is designed as a strategic tool to improve educational quality, it simultaneously influences how freedom is interpreted and enacted in schools. This suggests that even within a flexible curriculum framework, assessment structures can still function as a subtle mechanism that shapes and directs learning processes. These conditions highlight that educational reform is not only a matter of changing policy, but also of addressing deeper pedagogical and institutional realities. As Freire reminds us, education is never neutral; it is always connected to power, culture, and inequality.

Given these conditions, rethinking the Merdeka Belajar policy becomes essential. This reconsideration should move beyond policy rhetoric and focus on how freedom is actually experienced in the classroom. It requires teachers to take on more dialogical roles, encourages students to engage critically with their realities, and ensures that learning is meaningfully connected to their lived experiences. Only through such efforts can the Merdeka Curriculum truly reflect education as a practice of freedom and serve as a pathway toward social transformation.

Conclusion

The new policy of freedom to learn was launched in the end of 2019. This policy giving the freedom perception to teachers and students in learning process called freedom to learn. The objective of freedom to learn curriculum are simple and deep, freedom, and relevant and interactive. Freedom to Learn curriculum accordance with the Freire's thinking in several area. Freire's was criticism the banking education. He wanted the students not only receipt the material in the classroom like banking system, but students and teacher appeared discussion problem solving. The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture suitable with Freire thinking that students have their competency and skill. Students can increase their skill with their independent learning. When then learning more discussion among teachers and students will improve the student's criticism.

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