



The Concept of Merdeka Belajar in a Review of Naturalism and Modern Education Streams

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Abstrak

This article aims to analyze comparatively the views of the philosophy of naturalism and the modern school of education and its relevance to the concept of Freedom of Learning in the Indonesian education system. Freedom of Learning is understood not only as an education policy, but also as a reflection of the philosophical foundations that affect the goals, learning process, and roles of educators and students. This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method through the study of works of educational philosophy figures, scientific journal articles, and national education policy documents. Data were analyzed using thematic and comparative analysis to identify similarities, differences, and conceptual intersections between naturalism and modern education. The results show that naturalism emphasizes the natural development, freedom, and individuality of learners, while modern education emphasizes collaborative, reflective, and student-centered learning within a structured social framework. The synthesis of these two perspectives is reflected in the concept of Freedom of Learning which integrates freedom of learning with social responsibility and meaningful learning. Thus, the integration of naturalism and modern education provides a strong philosophical foundation for the development of Freedom of Learning in the context of Indonesian education.

Kata Kunci: Merdeka Belajar ; Naturalism; Educational Philosophy ; Literature Study ; Modern Education

Abstract

This article aims to analyze comparatively the views of the philosophy of naturalism and the modern school of education and its relevance to the concept of Freedom of Learning in the Indonesian education system. Freedom of Learning is understood not only as an education policy, but also as a reflection of the philosophical foundations that affect the goals, learning process, and roles of educators and students. This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method through the study of works of educational philosophy figures, scientific journal articles, and national education policy documents. Data were analyzed using thematic and comparative analysis to identify similarities, differences, and conceptual intersections between naturalism and modern education. The results show that naturalism emphasizes the natural development, freedom, and individuality of learners, while modern education emphasizes collaborative, reflective, and student-centered learning within a structured social framework. The synthesis of these two perspectives is reflected in the concept of Freedom of Learning which integrates freedom of learning with social responsibility and meaningful learning. Thus, the integration of naturalism and modern education provides a strong philosophical foundation for the development of Freedom of Learning in the context of Indonesian education.

Keywords: Merdeka Belajar ; Naturalism; Educational Philosophy ; Literature Study ; Modern Education

1. Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modern educational philosophy shifted through the work of John Dewey, Carl Rogers, and Lev Vygotsky, whose theories placed experience, interaction, and learner growth at the core of education. Dewey's progressivism framed learning as a reflective process grounded in authentic problem solving and democratic participation in classrooms (Biesta, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Rogers' humanistic approach emphasized learner autonomy, emotional safety, and self-directed growth as central elements of meaningful education (Cornelius-White et al., 2016; Schunk, 2020). From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky's ideas continue to inform contemporary views of learning as socially mediated through dialogue, collaboration, and cultural tools (Lantolf et al., 2015; Daniels, 2016). These perspectives collectively support the view that education extends beyond knowledge transmission toward the development of critical thinking, creativity, and socio-emotional competence (Hattie, 2017; Illeris, 2018).

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The integration of naturalist and modern educational philosophies has significantly informed the conceptual orientation of Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar policy. Naturalist assumptions foreground learner autonomy, respect for individual differences, and the right to develop in accordance with personal capacities rather than uniform standards (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Zhao, 2018). In parallel, modern educational philosophy emphasizes collaborative learning, critical inquiry, and contextualized problem solving as essential for preparing learners to navigate complex social realities (Giroux, 2020; Voogt et al., 2015). These combined perspectives position Merdeka Belajar as a framework that moves beyond curriculum deregulation toward the cultivation of meaningful, participatory learning environments (OECD, 2021; Priestley et al., 2019). Within this paradigm, teachers are expected to act as designers of flexible and responsive learning ecologies rather than mere transmitters of content (Laurillard, 2016; Fullan et al., 2020). Consequently, Merdeka Belajar advances an educational model that integrates individual agency with social responsibility, enabling learners to develop critical, creative, and civic-oriented competencies for contemporary society (Biesta, 2020; Trilling & Fadel, 2016).

Educational thought has continued to evolve through the ideas of Dewey, Rogers, Piaget, and Vygotsky. Their theories emphasize experiential learning, social interaction, collaboration, and reflection. They also support a shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogy (Kirschner et al., 2018; Schunk, 2020). These developments align with Indonesia's educational vision in the National Education System Law, the 2013 Curriculum, and the Merdeka Belajar policy. These frameworks promote learner autonomy, differentiated instruction, and holistic development (OECD, 2020; Schleicher, 2018). They also encourage creativity, critical thinking, and character education (Zhao, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). However, implementation remains uneven due to socioeconomic inequality and limited school resources (Tikly, 2017; OECD, 2021). Cultural diversity further shapes classroom practices across regions (Biesta, 2020; Zhao, 2018). Despite these constraints, the integration of naturalism and modern educational philosophy remains relevant. It supports flexible and humanistic learning models that respect individual potential (Illeris, 2018; Fullan, 2020). This philosophical foundation strengthens Merdeka Belajar as a framework for meaningful learner empowerment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Biesta, 2020).

Although Merdeka Belajar rests on a strong philosophical foundation, its implementation faces major challenges in Indonesia. Unequal access to infrastructure, digital tools, and trained teachers limits the effectiveness of learner-centered and experiential learning, especially in remote areas (Tikly, 2017; Zhao, 2018). Many teachers also struggle to move from teacher-centered instruction to a facilitative role, as traditional exam-oriented practices remain dominant (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Fullan, 2020). Assessment systems further constrain reform by prioritizing standardized testing over holistic competence development (Biesta, 2020; Zhao, 2018). Parental expectations often reinforce this focus on scores rather than creativity and critical thinking (Schleicher, 2018; Biesta, 2020). In addition, Indonesia's cultural and socioeconomic diversity requires locally responsive approaches, since uniform models rarely fit all contexts (Tikly, 2017; Biesta, 2020). As a result, the success of Merdeka Belajar depends on sustained teacher development and collaborative support across schools and communities.

The philosophy reflected in the title highlights lifelong learning, continuous self-development, and the search for personal meaning through lived experience, which closely corresponds to contemporary interpretations of Deweyan experiential learning. Recent scholarship continues to frame learning as an active and reflective process shaped by engagement with authentic contexts rather than passive knowledge transmission (Kolb, 2015; Biesta, 2015). Knowledge construction is understood as emerging through interaction with the environment, supporting both cognitive and socio-emotional growth (Illeris, 2018; Hattie, 2017). This orientation intersects with modern Montessori-based approaches that emphasize learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation, although they still rely more strongly on structured and carefully prepared learning environments (Lillard, 2017; Marshall, 2017). By contrast, contemporary critical pedagogy, inspired by Freire, positions education as a practice of dialogue, critical inquiry, and social transformation (Giroux, 2020; Darder, 2018). Compared with these perspectives, the philosophy underlying the title remains closer to experiential learning, as it views learning as an ongoing process rooted in curiosity, reflection, and everyday life rather than in rigid instructional design or explicitly political struggle.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Education as a Basic Humanitarian Activity

Education is a fundamental human endeavor through which individuals systematically develop knowledge, values, and identity within various social and cultural contexts. Modern research defines education as a developmental process that fosters agency, meaning-making, and ethical orientation, rather than simply the accumulation of knowledge (Biesta, 2016; Illeris, 2018; Nussbaum, 2016; Schunk, 2020; Hattie, 2017). Continuous involvement in learning cultivates individuals' intellectual, emotional, and moral faculties, facilitating reflective engagement in both personal and civic spheres (Biesta, 2020; Illeris, 2018; Nussbaum, 2016; Schunk, 2020; Hattie, 2017). In this regard, education serves as a pivotal mechanism connecting individual growth with social continuity and transformation (Biesta, 2016; Biesta, 2020; Illeris, 2018; Nussbaum, 2016; Hattie, 2017). This notion emphasizes that education is fundamentally relational rather than solely instructional. It underscores that learning acquires importance through interaction with others and social circumstances. Therefore, education should be perceived as both an individual and communal pursuit.

The significance of education in shaping personal and social identity has garnered heightened interest in modern educational thought. Educational experiences influence individuals' self-perception, interpretation of social norms, and sense of duty towards others (Biesta, 2016; Nussbaum, 2016; Illeris, 2018; Schunk, 2020; Hattie, 2017). Educational processes cultivate reflexivity, self-direction, and ethical judgment, thereby equipping learners to traverse intricate moral and cultural terrains (Biesta, 2020; Illeris, 2018; Nussbaum, 2016; Schunk, 2020; Hattie, 2017). Education fosters cognitive development as well as the enhancement of civic and moral awareness (Biesta, 2016; Biesta, 2020; Illeris, 2018; Nussbaum, 2016; Hattie, 2017). Consequently, identity formation is inextricably linked to the process of learning. Educational environments offer venues for individuals to discuss values and social positions. These agreements influence how learners situate themselves within society.

Learning extends beyond formal institutions and is disseminated throughout various social contexts that facilitate knowledge, values, and behaviors. Families, communities, and workplaces serve as crucial environments for learning, enabling individuals to develop cultural knowledge and practical skills (Livingstone, 2016; Eraut, 2017; Jarvis, 2017; Illeris, 2018; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020). Informal learning, integrated into daily involvement and interaction, frequently has a lasting impact on human growth due to its strong connection with lived experience (Eraut, 2017; Jarvis, 2017; Illeris, 2018; Livingstone, 2016; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020). These dynamics highlight the fundamentally social and contextual nature of educational processes (Biesta, 2016; Illeris, 2018; Jarvis, 2017; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020; Livingstone, 2016). Such learning environments facilitate the acquisition of tacit knowledge that traditional education struggles to impart. They additionally facilitate the enhancement of social and communicative competence. Consequently, quotidian environments transform into significant educational arenas

A. 2.2 The Role of Educational Philosophy in Directing Learning Practices

Education risks being reduced to a purely technical and procedural activity when it is not guided by a coherent philosophical foundation, a concern widely emphasized in contemporary educational theory (Biesta, 2016; Nussbaum, 2016). Philosophy of education provides the normative and conceptual framework that directs educational aims, pedagogical methods, curriculum design, and assessment practices toward meaningful human development rather than mere efficiency (Illeris, 2018; Schunk, 2020). Without philosophical grounding, educational systems tend to prioritize measurable outputs over deeper forms of learning that support autonomy, ethical reasoning, and social responsibility (Hattie, 2017; Zhao, 2018). As a result, teaching risks becoming instrumental rather than educational in the fullest sense.

Philosophical thinking in education addresses fundamental questions concerning the nature of learners, how learning occurs, and what purposes education ought to serve, all of which significantly shape instructional practice (Biesta, 2016; Illeris, 2018). These assumptions influence how teachers interpret student ability, motivation, and development in everyday classroom contexts (Schunk, 2020; Nussbaum, 2016). When philosophical perspectives are absent, educational policy and classroom practice often become dominated by technical or administrative considerations that overlook learners' lived experiences and social realities (Hattie, 2017; Zhao, 2018). A philosophical orientation therefore allows learning to be understood as a culturally and ethically embedded human process.

For this reason, engagement with educational philosophy is essential for ensuring that teaching and policy development remain oriented toward meaningful human purposes (Biesta, 2020; Illeris, 2018). Philosophical reflection enables educators to critically examine existing approaches and to design learning experiences that are responsive to learners' developmental and social needs (Schunk, 2020; Nussbaum, 2016). It also offers a framework for evaluating educational reform in terms of ethical and pedagogical significance rather than technical efficiency alone (Hattie, 2017; Zhao, 2018). Through this reflective lens, education can function as a practice that promotes dignity, agency, and responsible participation in a complex and changing world.

2.3 Naturalism, Modern Education, and the Philosophical Foundation of Merdeka Belajar

Throughout the history of educational thought, multiple philosophical traditions have emerged, each offering distinct perspectives on how human beings should be educated, a diversity that contemporary theorists regard as a source of epistemological richness in education (Biesta, 2016; Nussbaum, 2016). While perennialism emphasizes enduring moral values and essentialism prioritizes core knowledge, progressive, humanistic, and constructivist traditions foreground experience, reflection, and social interaction as foundations of meaningful learning (Illeris, 2018; Schunk, 2020; Hattie, 2017). As Biesta (2020) argues, such plurality reflects the inherently normative and context-dependent nature of education rather than the dominance of a single universal model. This diversity demonstrates that educational practice is continuously shaped by human needs and socio-cultural conditions.

Within this philosophical landscape, naturalism occupies a distinctive position by viewing learners as individuals endowed with innate potential and a natural drive to learn, a view that remains influential in contemporary learning theory (Illeris, 2018; Biesta, 2016). Rather than imposing rigid structures, naturalism emphasizes the role of authentic experience in shaping understanding and personal development, allowing learners to grow in ways that reflect their unique dispositions (Hattie, 2017). In this framework, the teacher functions primarily as a facilitator who creates conditions for exploration and discovery, aligning with modern views of learner agency and intrinsic motivation (Schunk, 2020; Nussbaum, 2016). Learning is therefore conceived as a process of organic growth rather than external control.

Modern education builds upon progressive, humanistic, and constructivist traditions to establish learner-centered environments within socially organized learning systems (Biesta, 2020; Illeris, 2018). Knowledge is constructed through collaboration, inquiry, and reflection, which situates learning within shared meaning-making rather than isolated cognition (Hattie, 2017; Schunk, 2020). This approach also highlights emotional well-being and personal autonomy as central to deep and sustainable learning (Nussbaum, 2016; Biesta, 2016). Consequently, modern education seeks to balance individual freedom with pedagogical support that enables learners to engage critically and creatively with their environment.

Although naturalism and modern education both value learner autonomy and experiential learning, they diverge in their underlying orientations, a distinction that remains salient in contemporary educational theory (Biesta, 2016; Illeris, 2018). Naturalism privileges individual development with minimal external intervention, whereas modern education conceptualizes learning as a socially mediated process that requires structured interaction and reflective guidance (Hattie, 2017; Schunk, 2020). These differences have direct implications for curriculum design and the professional role of teachers, as they influence whether education is framed primarily as personal growth or as collaborative knowledge construction (Nussbaum, 2016; Biesta, 2020). Understanding these contrasts enables educators to adopt philosophically coherent and context-responsive pedagogical strategies.

In the Indonesian context, these philosophical principles are embodied in the Merdeka Belajar policy, which integrates naturalist and modern educational ideals to promote meaningful, learner-centered education (Biesta, 2020; Illeris, 2018). The policy affirms that each learner possesses unique potential and should be given opportunities to grow through authentic experience while also engaging in collaborative inquiry and critical reflection (Hattie, 2017; Schunk, 2020). By combining individual freedom with social responsibility, Merdeka Belajar represents a philosophical synthesis that responds to the demands of contemporary education (Nussbaum, 2016; Biesta, 2016). This integration suggests that educational progress depends not on philosophical uniformity but on the productive dialogue between diverse traditions in shaping holistic and contextually relevant learning

3. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research (literature-based) approach. This method is selected because the primary objective of the study is to examine philosophical ideas and conceptual frameworks rather than to measure variables empirically or to conduct field experiments. Library research is particularly appropriate for inquiries that aim to explore educational philosophy, trace the historical development of ideas, and analyze theoretical relationships across intellectual traditions (Snyder, 2019; Booth et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within philosophical and theoretical research, meaning is constructed through systematic engagement with texts rather than through numerical data, making this approach suitable for investigating naturalism, modern educational thought, and the conceptual foundations of *Merdeka Belajar* (Maxwell et al., 2018; Saldaña, 2016). The qualitative nature of this study allows for in-depth interpretation of key scholarly sources related to naturalism, experiential learning, humanistic education, and contemporary Indonesian education reform. Qualitative inquiry is particularly useful for examining how assumptions about human nature, learning, and educational purposes shape policy and pedagogical paradigms (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than seeking statistical generalization, this study prioritizes conceptual clarity, philosophical coherence, and interpretive depth, which are central to theory-driven educational research.

The procedure of the library research follows four systematic stages. First, relevant academic sources were identified and collected through databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, focusing on peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books published after 2000 that address naturalism, modern educational philosophy, and *Merdeka Belajar* (Snyder, 2019; Booth et al., 2016). Second, the selected texts were screened based on relevance, theoretical rigor, and citation impact to ensure the inclusion of authoritative and influential works (Hart, 2018; Maxwell et al., 2018). Third, the texts were analyzed using thematic and conceptual coding, in which key ideas, assumptions, and philosophical positions were identified and compared across sources (Saldaña, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Finally, the findings were synthesized through an integrative interpretive process that connected classical philosophical perspectives with contemporary educational policy in Indonesia, allowing the construction of a coherent conceptual framework for understanding *Merdeka Belajar* (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2020).

3.1 Data Resources

The data sources in this study are divided into two main categories, namely primary sources and secondary sources, to ensure theoretical depth as well as contextual relevance :

1. Primary sources consist of classical and fundamental works of philosophers of education whose thinking is closely related to naturalism and modern education. These works include the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, Carl Rogers, Lev Vygotsky, and Paulo Freire. These works are used to identify key philosophical assumptions related to learners' autonomy, experiential learning, social interaction, and critical awareness
2. Secondary sources include scientific journal articles that have gone through a peer-reviewed process, textbooks on philosophy of education, Indonesian education policy documents, and academic publications that discuss Freedom of Learning and student-centered education. These sources provide contemporary interpretation, criticism, and application of philosophical ideas in the context of today's education, especially in Indonesia..

3.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using thematic and comparative analysis techniques. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring concepts and key philosophical themes in the literature, such as freedom of learning, natural development, learner-centered learning, social interaction, and reflective practice. These themes are then classified based on their relationship with naturalism, modern education, or the concept of Freedom of Learning.

Furthermore, comparative analysis is used to examine the similarities and differences between naturalism and modern educational thought. This analysis focuses on differences in views on the role of teachers, the nature of the learning process, the structure of the educational environment, and the balance between individual autonomy and social responsibility. Through this comparative approach, the research seeks to explain how the synthesis of the two philosophical perspectives forms the conceptual foundation of Freedom of Learning

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CHARACTERISTICS OF NATURALISM IN EDUCATION

Naturalism in education conceptualizes learners as individuals who possess inherent potential, natural curiosity, and an intrinsic capacity for growth and self-development. Within this philosophical framework, education is understood as a process that should respect and follow the natural patterns of learners' physical, cognitive, emotional, and moral development. Rather than imposing rigid institutional control, naturalistic education emphasizes harmony between learning processes and human nature (Guttek, 2014; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). When instruction aligns with learners' developmental stages, learning becomes more meaningful, sustainable, and personally relevant.

Contemporary interpretations of naturalism emphasize the importance of experiential learning and authentic interaction with the environment. Modern educational theorists argue that meaningful learning emerges through direct engagement, observation, and contextual exploration rather than abstract memorization (Guttek, 2014). Learning experiences that are connected to real-life situations enable students to internalize knowledge more deeply and apply it effectively across diverse contexts. This perspective reinforces the view that education should prioritize lived experience as the foundation of intellectual development.

From a naturalistic standpoint, learning is viewed as an intrinsic, spontaneous, and self-motivated process. Students are encouraged to explore their interests, formulate questions, and seek understanding through personal discovery. Motivation is derived primarily from internal curiosity and personal relevance rather than external rewards or punitive mechanisms (Guttek, 2014; Trilling & Fadel, 2019). Such conditions foster self-regulation, independence, and lifelong learning habits, enabling learners to develop confidence in their intellectual abilities and decision-making processes.

In this context, the teacher's role is redefined from that of an authoritative transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator of meaningful learning experiences. Teachers are responsible for creating supportive, stimulating, and flexible learning environments that encourage exploration and reflection. According to Ornstein and Hunkins (2018), effective instruction within a naturalistic framework requires teachers to observe learners carefully, provide appropriate learning resources, and intervene strategically when necessary. This approach promotes active participation and knowledge construction through experimentation and reflection.

Overall, the fundamental characteristics of naturalism in education include freedom of learning, experiential engagement, respect for individual differences, and the cultivation of intrinsic motivation. Education is perceived not merely as academic training but as a holistic process that nurtures intellectual growth, emotional balance, moral awareness, and environmental sensitivity (Biesta, 2015; Trilling & Fadel, 2019). In contemporary educational contexts, naturalistic principles remain highly relevant, particularly in promoting learner autonomy, creativity, and sustainable educational practices that respond to the complex demands of modern society.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERN EDUCATION

Modern education has developed in response to rapid social transformation, technological innovation, and increasing global interconnectedness. The findings of this study indicate that contemporary education is expected not only to transmit knowledge but also to prepare learners for complex social, economic, and cultural challenges. Consequently, modern educational systems emphasize student-centered learning, critical inquiry, and collaborative problem-solving as essential components of effective instruction (Biesta, 2015; Hattie, 2017). Knowledge is no longer perceived as a fixed body of information but as a dynamic construct that emerges through meaningful engagement and reflective practice.

Within this paradigm, learning is understood as a fundamentally social process shaped by interaction, dialogue, and shared experiences. The findings further suggest that social participation and mediated activities play a central role in cognitive development, as emphasized in contemporary interpretations of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 2018). Through cooperative learning, peer discussions, and group-based projects, students are able to negotiate meaning, develop communication skills, and internalize complex concepts. These collaborative practices support deeper understanding and promote collective responsibility for learning outcomes.

The role of teachers in modern education has shifted significantly from traditional authoritative models toward facilitative and mentoring-oriented practices. Teachers are increasingly expected to function as learning designers who create environments that stimulate inquiry, creativity, and independent thinking. According to Hattie (2017), effective teachers guide learners in developing higher-order thinking skills, metacognitive awareness, and self-directed learning habits. This evolving role requires strong pedagogical expertise, technological proficiency, and interpersonal competence to respond to diverse learner needs.

Modern instructional approaches emphasize active and inquiry-oriented methodologies, including project-based learning, problem-based learning, and digitally supported instruction. These strategies encourage students to engage with authentic problems, integrate interdisciplinary knowledge, and apply learning in real-world contexts (Trilling & Fadel, 2019). The integration of digital technologies further enhances access to information, supports personalized learning, and facilitates collaboration beyond classroom boundaries. As a result, learners are better equipped to adapt to rapid technological and social change.

In addition to cognitive development, modern education places strong emphasis on students' emotional, social, and ethical growth. Schools are increasingly recognized as spaces for cultivating empathy, resilience, communication skills, and civic responsibility. Biesta (2015) emphasizes that education should contribute to the formation of democratic, reflective, and socially responsible citizens. Through inclusive learning environments and participatory practices, modern education seeks to balance academic excellence with moral and social development, thereby fostering holistic and sustainable learning.

SYNTHESIS OF NATURALISM AND MODERN EDUCATION IN MERDEKA BELAJAR

The Merdeka Belajar policy in Indonesia represents a comprehensive synthesis between naturalistic and modern educational philosophies that seeks to respond to the complex demands of contemporary learning environments (Suryadi, 2021). Recent studies have emphasized that educational reform should balance learner autonomy with structured pedagogical guidance, and the findings of this study indicate that Merdeka Belajar integrates principles of learning freedom with collaborative, reflective, and critical pedagogical approaches. As argued by Suryadi (2021), such integration empowers students as active agents in their own educational development while strengthening the relevance of education in rapidly changing social and technological contexts.

From a naturalistic perspective, Merdeka Belajar emphasizes deep respect for individual interests, talents, learning rhythms, and personal developmental trajectories. Flexible learning pathways enable students to pursue academic goals that reflect their cognitive styles and personal aspirations. The findings further suggest that this approach promotes intrinsic motivation and self-regulated learning, which are essential for sustained academic engagement. By encouraging reflective learning practices, students gradually develop stronger academic responsibility and personal agency (Suryadi, 2021).

Modern educational theory has long emphasized the importance of experiential and inquiry-oriented instruction. In line with this view, Merdeka Belajar incorporates systematic project-based learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and reflective pedagogical practices (Trilling & Fadel, 2019). Learning activities are designed to address authentic social, environmental, and technological problems, enabling students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical application. Through sustained engagement with real-world challenges, learners strengthen analytical reasoning and collaborative competence, as emphasized in contemporary pedagogical research.

The role of teachers within the Merdeka Belajar framework extends beyond traditional instructional functions. According to Hattie (2017), effective teachers act as learning designers who provide continuous feedback and create supportive learning environments. Similarly, Suryadi (2021) argues that teachers must function as mentors and curriculum innovators. In this context, educators are responsible for implementing differentiated instruction, guiding reflective dialogue, and integrating digital technologies in pedagogically meaningful ways. Continuous professional development is therefore essential to maintain instructional quality and responsiveness to reform.

Ultimately, the philosophical and pedagogical synthesis embodied in Merdeka Belajar aims to cultivate learners who are intellectually independent, critically reflective, creatively productive, and morally grounded.

Biesta (2015) maintains that education should prioritize democratic engagement and ethical awareness alongside academic achievement. In a similar vein, Trilling and Fadel (2019) emphasize the importance of lifelong learning competencies in knowledge-based societies. By balancing personal freedom with collective responsibility, Merdeka Belajar seeks to prepare students for active participation in globally interconnected and socially responsible communities.

PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Philosophically, naturalism and modern education provide a strong theoretical foundation for the development of learner-centered and humanistic pedagogy. The findings of this study reveal that these perspectives emphasize respect for individual development, active participation, and meaningful engagement in learning processes. One major implication of this philosophical orientation is the gradual shift from authoritarian and teacher-dominated instruction toward participatory, dialogical, and democratic learning environments, as discussed by Ornstein and Hunkins (2018). Through this shift, classrooms become spaces for shared inquiry and reflective interaction rather than mere transmission of information.

In classroom practice, this transformation is reflected in the systematic implementation of active, experiential, and contextual learning strategies. Teachers are encouraged to design learning activities that promote exploration, critical reflection, and collaborative problem-solving. Meaningful learning, according to Dewey (2016), emerges through experience, inquiry, and continuous interaction with real-life situations. By integrating authentic tasks and inquiry-based approaches, educators enable students to construct knowledge more deeply and develop transferable skills.

From a curricular perspective, the integration of naturalistic and modern educational philosophies supports flexibility, differentiation, and responsiveness to learner diversity. Curriculum design is expected to accommodate variations in learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and developmental needs while remaining aligned with global educational demands. Biesta (2015) emphasizes that contemporary curricula should move beyond standardized content delivery toward the cultivation of agency and responsibility. This orientation is reflected in competency-based and modular curricula that allow schools and teachers to adapt learning pathways to local and individual contexts.

Another important implication is the strengthening of character education, moral reasoning, and social literacy within formal schooling. Educational institutions are increasingly expected to nurture ethical awareness, environmental responsibility, and civic engagement alongside academic competence. Trilling and Fadel (2019) argue that 21st-century education must integrate social and emotional learning with cognitive development in order to prepare students for complex social realities. Through value-based instruction and participatory practices, schools contribute to the formation of socially responsible and ethically grounded citizens.

In conclusion, the integration of naturalism and modern education results in holistic, reflective, and sustainable educational practices that address intellectual, emotional, moral, and social dimensions of human development. This integrated approach prepares learners to think critically, act ethically, and engage constructively with diverse social contexts. In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, such philosophically grounded educational practices play a crucial role in fostering lifelong learning, democratic participation, and positive societal transformation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the philosophical foundations of naturalism and modern education and their synthesis within the Merdeka Belajar framework in Indonesia. The findings indicate that these educational paradigms share a common commitment to learner-centeredness, experiential learning, and the holistic development of students. By emphasizing autonomy, critical inquiry, and social engagement, the integration of these perspectives provides a coherent theoretical basis for contemporary educational reform. This philosophical alignment strengthens the relevance of education in responding to changing social, technological, and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that the implementation of naturalistic and modern educational principles contributes significantly to the transformation of classroom practices. Learning environments that prioritize exploration, collaboration, and reflection enable students to actively construct knowledge and develop

higher-order thinking skills. Teachers, as facilitators and mentors, play a central role in mediating these processes and ensuring that learning remains meaningful and inclusive. As a result, education becomes a dynamic and participatory process rather than a rigid transmission of information.

From an institutional and curricular perspective, this study highlights the importance of flexibility, differentiation, and contextual relevance in educational design. Curriculum frameworks that accommodate learner diversity and local realities while maintaining global standards support the development of adaptive and resilient learners. The integration of character education, digital literacy, and social responsibility further enhances the capacity of schools to prepare students for complex societal challenges. These findings underscore the necessity of aligning curriculum development with philosophical and pedagogical principles.

In conclusion, the synthesis of naturalism, modern education, and Merdeka Belajar offers a sustainable model for fostering intellectual competence, moral integrity, and social awareness among learners. This integrated approach not only promotes academic excellence but also cultivates lifelong learning dispositions and democratic values. Future research is encouraged to explore empirical applications of these philosophical frameworks across diverse educational settings, thereby strengthening the evidence base for policy development and instructional innovation.

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