

Progressivism and Curriculum Reform in Indonesia: A Systematic Review of the Theoretical Alignment, Implementation Challenges, and Promising Models in the Merdeka Curriculum

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ABSTRACT: Progressivism has gained attention in educational practice. Although previous studies on progressivist principles and the Merdeka curriculum have grown rapidly, little attention of comprehensive synthesis in discussing theoretical, implementation, and pedagogical dimensions. A systematic review addresses this gap by examining the theoretical alignment of progressivism and Merdeka Curriculum, the implementation challenges, and promising models that are translated into educational practice in Indonesia. A total of 1014 journal articles were identified as relevant literature published between 2015 and 2025. Following PRISMA guidelines, 41 final articles were identified as relevant and qualified as the core sources for this study. The findings indicated a strong philosophical alignment between the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum and the principles of progressivism. However, there were challenges in implementing the progressivism principle, particularly in terms of limited teacher readiness and competence, limited resources and instructional time, limited professional support, and institutional constraints. Moreover, students' diversity and different levels of understanding were other challenges in implementing the progressivism principle. On the other hand, promising models for progressivist educational practice included project-based learning, experiential learning, collaborative learning, differentiated learning, discovery learning, and the use of technology in teaching. The project-based learning model was the most dominant in educational practice. The study contributes by positioning progressivism as a pedagogical framework for understanding the Merdeka Curriculum in terms of students' agency, experiential learning, and a flexible learning environment. It also highlights the importance of teacher readiness, institutional support, and pedagogical practice to support curriculum reform in Indonesia.

Keywords: *merdeka* curriculum, progressivism, student-centered.

ABSTRAK: *Progresivisme telah mendapatkan perhatian dalam praktik pendidikan. Meskipun penelitian sebelumnya terkait prinsip progresivis dan kurikulum Merdeka berkembang pesat, perhatian terhadap sintesis komprehensif dalam membahas dimensi teoritis, implementasi, dan pedagogis masih sangat terbatas. Tinjauan sistematis ini berupaya mengisi kesenjangan penelitian dengan menganalisis keselarasan teoretis antara progresivisme dan Kurikulum Merdeka, mengidentifikasi berbagai tantangan dalam implementasinya, serta mengkaji model-model potensial yang dapat menerjemahkan prinsip-prinsip progresivisme ke dalam praktik pendidikan Indonesia. Sebanyak 1014 artikel jurnal diidentifikasi sebagai literatur relevan yang terbit antara tahun 2015 dan 2025. Dengan mengikuti pedoman PRISMA, sebanyak 41 artikel terpilih dinyatakan relevan dan memenuhi kriteria untuk digunakan sebagai sumber utama dalam penelitian ini. Temuan menunjukkan keselarasan filosofis yang kuat antara tujuan Kurikulum Merdeka dan prinsip progresivisme. Namun, terdapat tantangan dalam penerapan prinsip progresivisme, terutama dalam hal keterbatasan kesiapan dan kompetensi guru, keterbatasan sumber daya dan waktu pengajaran, kurangnya dukungan profesional, serta berbagai kendala institutional. Selain itu, keberagaman dan tingkat pemahaman siswa yang berbeda merupakan tantangan lain dalam menerapkan prinsip progresivisme. Di sisi lain, sejumlah model pembelajaran dinilai memiliki potensi dalam mendukung praktik pendidikan yang berlandaskan progresivisme, antara lain pembelajaran berbasis proyek,*

pembelajaran berbasis pengalaman, pembelajaran kolaboratif, pembelajaran berdiferensiasi, pembelajaran penemuan, serta pemanfaatan teknologi dalam proses pembelajaran. Model pembelajaran berbasis proyek adalah yang paling dominan dalam praktik pendidikan. Studi ini berkontribusi dengan memposisikan progresivisme sebagai kerangka pedagogis untuk memahami Kurikulum Merdeka dalam hal agensi siswa, pembelajaran pengalaman, dan lingkungan belajar yang fleksibel. Studi ini juga menyoroti pentingnya kesiapan guru, dukungan institusional, dan praktik pedagogis untuk mendukung reformasi kurikulum di Indonesia.

Kata kunci: kurikulum merdeka, progresivisme, pembelajaran berpusat pada peserta didik.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic development of modern society in the 21st century has driven significant changes in the education sector, requiring schools to adapt to the demands and global challenges. Facing the 21st century, the education sector emphasizes that learners develop creativity, critical thinking, and collaborative abilities to adapt in every new situation. For centuries, education has been affected by philosophical systems, offering distinct perspectives on the learning process (Rahman & Rosbandi, 2024). Philosophy serves as the educational foundation, determining educational goals, teaching methods, the subject and object of education, and also the culture of a region that cannot be separated from education itself (Faelasup, 2024). It cannot be separated from the activities of human thinking and studying philosophy is expected to grow critical thinking and be deeply rooted.

The development of the education sector in Indonesia over the past two decades has given focus on progressivism. It is concerned with *learning by doing* and emphasizes problem-solving and critical thinking. The broader educational shift reflects the central ideas of progressivism, particularly its emphasis on active learning and students' participation in the learning process. This philosophy was developed by John Dewey and places the student at the centre of the educational process, where real experience becomes the main medium in learning (Dewey, 1938). Dewey viewed education as a means of preparing people to participate actively in emerging civilizations. As an educational ideology, it calls for constant advancement and its application in a thorough, constructive, and creative manner. According to the ideology of progressivism, every human being requires change in order to constantly grow and improve (Albeta et al, 2023). It emphasizes that students to continue and to advance in order to develop their potential of students and it always demands moving forward to act. The flow of progressivism appreciates a person's ability to solve problems with their experience by emphasizing active learning, encouraging students to actively engage in practical exercises, critical thinking, and the application of knowledge (Khadim et al, 2023). The landscape of progressivism emphasizes the learners as the centre of learning activity, and the teachers act as facilitators that help the learners build up the meaning of the learning activity through direct observation. In this situation, the teacher's main responsibility changes from imparting knowledge to serving as a facilitator who helps, encourages, and gives students the freedom to create their own understanding (Florungco & Caballes, 2022; Fredrik & Wibowo, 2019; Navisa et al, 2022).

As international discussion, curriculum reform plays a significant debate in educational setting. Curriculum reform is a trend globally and a.n. important focus as

countries and educational institutions aim to develop curricula that prepare students for the challenges and needs of the 21st century (Mitchell & Buntic, 2023). This global movement has increased attention toward progressive educational perspectives as theoretical foundations for curriculum transformation. Therefore, curriculum reform need to be understood as a contextual process rather than the direct adoption of educational model.

In Indonesia, curriculum reform is an important strategy to enhance educational quality. The Indonesian curriculum has undergone various adjustments in integrating skills into learning practices. The Merdeka Curriculum become a main reform to transform the learning process through flexibility, student-centered, creativity, critical thinking, and contextual learning experiences. Therefore, manifestation of the influence of progressivism can be found in the Merdeka curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum introduced a transformative educational initiative and represents visible manifestations of progressivism philosophy in curriculum design (Wahyuni et al, 2024). This curriculum promotes the concept of differentiated learning, a contextual learning approach, and reflective student profiles, fundamentally departing from traditional models. Progressive education that emphasizes learning through experience and the active role of students finds deep points in this Merdeka Curriculum design (Aksan et al, 2025). However, the extend of Merdeka Curriculum is connected to the principles of progressivism remains a subject of debate. Some previous studies showed the alignment between progressivism and Merdeka Curriculum, while other studies showed inconsistencies between the objective of the curriculum and the implementation. In other words, the relation between Merdeka Curriculum and progressivism philosophy is not fully established. The cases are requiring deeply and comprehensive study to identify the gaps. In addition, examining the alignment between Merdeka Curriculum and progressivism while analyzing implementation challenges and emerging practices within the Merdeka Curriculum together is important and is still limited. Beyond the alignment of the Merdeka Curriculum with progressivism based on policy analysis, understanding progressivism in Indonesia context needs to be investigated through actual classroom practices.

Progressivism is significantly characterized by several key principles that inform classroom practice. The roles of students are as active participants in the learning environment, engaging in collaborative problem-solving (Nuha & Gustama, 2024), and the teacher as the facilitator who guides the students through experiential learning activities in the classroom (Poudel et al, 2025). However, some empirical studies have shown that the implementation of progressivism in classroom practice in Indonesia tends to vary. Some teachers have adapted the learning process based on projects and reflective discussion, but many teachers still apply the lecture method focusing on memorizing concepts. The case indicates challenges that influence the extent to which progressivism can be present in learning practices. The challenges cannot be separated from the Indonesian education context that is still teacher-centered. The fundamental barrier to progressivism philosophy in Indonesia is based on cultural values that prioritize teacher authority and hierarchical relationships between learners and teachers (Nihayah et al, 2023). In this context, promoting progressivism philosophy

often faces obstacles such as the limited understanding of teachers of a constructivist approach and the perception that active methods take longer time.

In this context, examining the balance of progressivism philosophy in the education context in greater detail and the way it is implemented is essential. The systematic literature review (SLR) can provide comprehensive insight in how the Merdeka Curriculum incorporates progressivism principles and how progressivism philosophy affects learning practice. The review is expected to contribute theoretically to the discourse on progressivism in education and offer practical recommendations for readers, teachers, and future researchers in designing contextual strategies in developing progressive education in Indonesia. Based on the background explained above, the researchers formulated the research question, which includes: 1) To what extent do the stated goals of the Merdeka Curriculum align with the core principles of progressivism? 2) What are the challenges in implementing a progressivist approach in the education system of Indonesia? 3) What emerging models of successful progressivist practice are evident in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia?

Progressivism Pioneered by John Dewey

Progressivism is an educational philosophy pioneered by John Dewey. It is concerned with *learning by doing*. The ideas of progressivism have been applied by educators seeking to change traditional teacher-centered methods into student-centered, experiential learning settings that foster democratic involvement and critical thinking (Deng, 2017). Progressivism emphasizes the importance of direct experience, creative, and critical thinking abilities in students (Sukiastini et al, 2023). John Dewey viewed education as a continuous process of experience in which students learn through active engagement and emphasized the continuity of experience, in which good learning must connect to experience in creating a meaningful and relevant learning process. Progressivist education has a paradigm in which education must be progressive and keep moving forward with development. Based on this perspective, knowledge is not treated as a fixed body of facts to be transmitted, but as something developed through inquiry in which the learners explore situations and build up understanding from action.

In the education context, Dewey's focus on experiential learning has served as a theoretical foundation for curriculum research and development initiatives across the globe (Cunningham, 2021). It views learning as an active process in which knowledge is acquired through direct experience rather than memorization only. Beside the experiential learning, Dewey emphasized reflective thinking as a central element of education. Dewey's concept of reflective thinking as a central element of education has inspired educators worldwide to foster critical thinking skills among students and has been integrated into curriculum designs (Bahat heg, 2019). This progressivist perspective provides a philosophical framework for understanding both the goals of reform and the practicalities of implementation in classroom practice, making it extremely pertinent for examining current curriculum reforms that place a high priority on competency development, student agency, and contextual learning.

Key Principles of Progressivism

In education settings, progressive education is reflected in various teaching methods involving collaborative work, project-based learning, and authentic assessment strategies (Khoirunnisa et al, 2024). Thus, it refers to experiential learning, democracy in education, and the teacher as the facilitator. Experiential learning is a central principle of progressivism in which students gain understanding when they do, not just listen. It refers to *learning by doing* principle emphasized by progressive educational philosophy (Chae, 2024). Within this framework, it combines theory and practice, which allows students to construct meaningful knowledge through reflection on their experiences. Real activities involving experiments, projects, observation, and problem-solving are ways of developing the concept. Dewey argued that a good experience has two essential characteristics included continuity and interaction (Mohammed, 2024). Dewey believed that experiences should be characterized by being continuous and linked with previous experiences. Interaction is the same as the conception of a good experience. It involves the relationship between individuals and their environment (Han, 2023).

The principle of learning based on experience continues directly to the concept of democracy in education. Dewey's theoretical framework on democratic education focused on the idea that every student is able to participate in and benefit from a dynamic, participatory society (Zaid et al., 2023). Students not only accept instruction from the teacher but also have the chance to build critical thinking, give arguments, and collaborate. Progressivism encourages democratic principles through specific pedagogical approaches rather than traditional teacher-centered instruction. In the learning process, students are given the freedom to express the opinion and participate actively, not just receive knowledge from the teachers (Budiwan & Malikah, 2022).

In progressive education, the teacher is not the center of learning activity but the facilitator. They are no longer mere transmitters of knowledge but guide the students to learn independently. In this context, the students are active participants, and teachers act as facilitators, focusing on problem-solving, collaboration, and democratic classroom environments rather than mere content mastery (Ramadani & Desyandri, 2022). The changing role from an authority who designs the learning environment by facilitating the students with questioning, scaffolding, and feedback to create active participation of learners. Those principles provide a conceptual framework to understand how curriculum promotes progressive learning and how such ideals can be realized in classroom activities.

Constructivism Theory

Progressivism is a philosophical foundation of student-centered education, while constructivism refers to the process of students developing knowledge. Constructivist theory is connected with the ideas of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky that focus to construct knowledge through experience and social interaction (Rai, 2025). From this perspective, students can learn more effectively when they are involved in meaningful activities. Moreover, students can use prior knowledge to acquire new information, and the teacher acts as a guide in the learning process (Chand, 2023). The

relationship between progressivism and constructivism is important in understanding contemporary curriculum reform. In this case, progressivism refers to why students become active participants, while constructivism refers to how students construct knowledge. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, the constructivism principle is related to encouraging students to explore problems and develop knowledge based on experiences. Moreover, constructivism provides a perspective to examine the extent to which the Merdeka Curriculum reflects progressive educational principles.

Student Agency in Progressive Education

Student agency is a term used to understand progressive education and curriculum reform. It relates to students' ability to regulate, control, and monitor their own learning (Code, 2020). Thus, it refers to an individual's ability to act and cause changes during the learning process (Hooshyar et al, 2023). Related to progressive education, student agency is important since learning is understood as a process of personal growth and social participation. In this case, the students need to develop critical thinking, creativity, solve problems, and participate in their communities. Moreover, the concept of student agency is relevant to curriculum reform since it is closely related to how learning objectives, teaching strategies, and assessment practices are designed. The Merdeka Curriculum relates to this term because this orientation emphasizes learner independence, differentiated learning, and meaningful learning experiences.

Curriculum Theory and Progressivism Curriculum Reform

Curriculum theory emphasizes that curriculum is not merely a formal document but a dynamic process involving interpretation and implementation. Curriculum reform involves changes not only in curriculum structures but also in pedagogical orientations, teacher roles, and student learning experiences. The Merdeka Curriculum is a curriculum that has just been widely implemented in Indonesia as a substitute for the 2013 Curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum is known to strengthen the learning process and encourage learning based on students' needs. This curriculum emphasizes project-based learning, critical thinking, and assessment systems that focus on student processes and competencies (Khair et al, 2026). In this case, students are encouraged to participate actively in the learning process through inquiry, collaboration, and project-based activities. The implementation of the Merdeka curriculum has brought significant changes in improving the quality of learning in Indonesia (Tunas & Pangkey, 2024). Moreover, it offers learning concepts, namely independent thinking, independent innovation, and independent and creative learning (Lawson & Harper, 2025).

Project-Based Learning, Inquiry-Based Learning, Collaborative Learning

In implementing in teaching, project-based learning, inquiry learning model, and collaborative learning are used mostly by teachers to construct active participation of the learners. Project-based learning represents a concrete manifestation of progressive educational philosophy. John Dewey championed the core philosophy of *learning by doing* that underpins Project-Based Learning (PBL).

Project-based learning was first initiated by John Dewey (Zulu, 2011) and was continued by Klipatrick, who defined it as a series of activities to solve problems based on solid experiments resulting from teamwork (Ayaz & Söylemez, 2015). Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (Bronfman, 2007) further supports Project-based Learning activities, as learning with this model is more effective. Project-Based learning is a very efficient tool to propel the capacity development of students (Wurdinger, 2016).

As part of the progressivist educational philosophy, inquiry-based learning (IBL) has attracted attention in the field of science education in recent years (Strat et al., 2024; Jegstad, 2023). Inquiry-based learning focuses on active participation and learners' responsibility for discovering knowledge (de Jong & van Joolingen, 1998). It is an effective model in science disciplines that shows significant improvements in critical thinking skills (Arifin et al, 2025). Several studies support the effectiveness of inquiry-based learning as an effective model. Kamaruddin et al (2023) found that the implementation of the IBL model is effective in improving EFL students' critical thinking skills. Moreover, inquiry-based learning involves the learners' active role in solving a problem (Wariyanti et al, 2019). And IBL is an effective model to develop students' meta-cognitive reading comprehension skills.

Another popular method related to progressivism principles is the collaborative learning method. Collaboration is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle, in which the students are responsible for their actions (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Collaborative learning experiences support group learning, encourage critical and creative problem solving, and enhance cognitive understanding (Gillies, 2016). In a collaborative situation, student writers are impelled to make decisions about the language needed to express their ideas as they produce a text together (Teng, 2021). Some studies have investigated the positive impact of collaborative learning. Collaborative learning helps learners to enhance their oral communication skills (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). It is a model used to help students when they have difficulty completing the assignment and to improve reading ability (Azhari et al, 2025).

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to provide a transparent and structured method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing research in a replicable manner. The systematic review methodology chosen, as outlined by Bolan et al (2017), involved planning, conducting the review, and reporting and analysis. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 with the aim of (1) analyzing the conceptual alignment between progressivism and the Merdeka Curriculum, (2) identifying significant challenges of the implementation of the progressivism approach, and (3) identifying promising models for progressivist educational practice in Indonesia. The study selection and reporting process was also organized based on PRISMA framework to provide comprehensive documentation of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies.

Planning the Review

The planning process aimed to establish a foundation for conducting the literature review. The planning stage involved the objective, scope, and protocol of the review to ensure consistency and replicability. Although some research has investigated the Progressivist, the literature used is limited and requires deep and specific exploration. Thus, further investigation is necessary to understand the conceptual alignment between progressivism and the Merdeka Curriculum, the implementation of progressivism in classroom practices, and significant challenges of the implementation of the progressivism approach. Moreover, the SLR aimed to address the gap by analyzing the available literature.

The population of this review consisted of studies on Progressivism published between 2015 and 2025. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that only studies meeting pre-defined inclusion criteria were analyzed. When choosing the necessary papers, inclusion and exclusion criteria were crucial. The criteria were also used to ensure that every article that was found was fairly evaluated. The inclusion and exclusion criteria can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Journal papers	Opinion pieces, book chapters
Language use Indonesian and English	Language not used: Indonesian and English
Accessible	Not accessible
Published between January 2015 and December 2025	Not published between January 2015 and December 2025
Indexing by SINTA or Scopus	No. Indexing by SINTA or Scopus
Focused on Progressivism and Merdeka Curriculum in the Indonesian context	Not focused on Progressivism and Merdeka Curriculum in the Indonesian context

Conducting the Review

The data for this stage were obtained from some major academic databases. The search process was conducted in three distinct databases, namely Scopus, Semantic Scholar, and Google Scholar. The selected of databases as they are globally recognized as a preeminent repository and reliable bibliographic data source for scientific publications (Pranckute, 2021). To ensure transparency, specific search strings were developed by combining the Merdeka Curriculum with concepts associated with progressivist education. The mode searched using combinations of keywords ("Progressivism" OR "progressive education" OR "John Dewey" AND "Kurikulum Merdeka" OR "Merdeka Curriculum" OR "Independent Curriculum" AND "Indonesia OR Indonesia education"). The search process was conducted in December 2025 using *Publish or Perish* software to assist the selection process. To get the best results, some filters were used. The search process using the *Publish or Perish* software. A total of 1014 bibliographies were generated. Furthermore, the results were saved in reference manager software.

In addition, the researchers conducted the final stage of this phase, extracting and synthesizing data. The extraction process was done to obtain data relevant to the

research purposes. During data filtering, the Zotero application was used to identify duplicate articles and delete them. Moreover, the researchers read the entire article and highlighted all essential points. The highlighted data was then entered into a table. Furthermore, synthesis was conducted to identify findings, conclusions, and offer suggestions for future research.

Reporting and Analysis

The qualitative systematic literature review encompasses a comprehensive overview of the various phases involved in conducting a literature review.

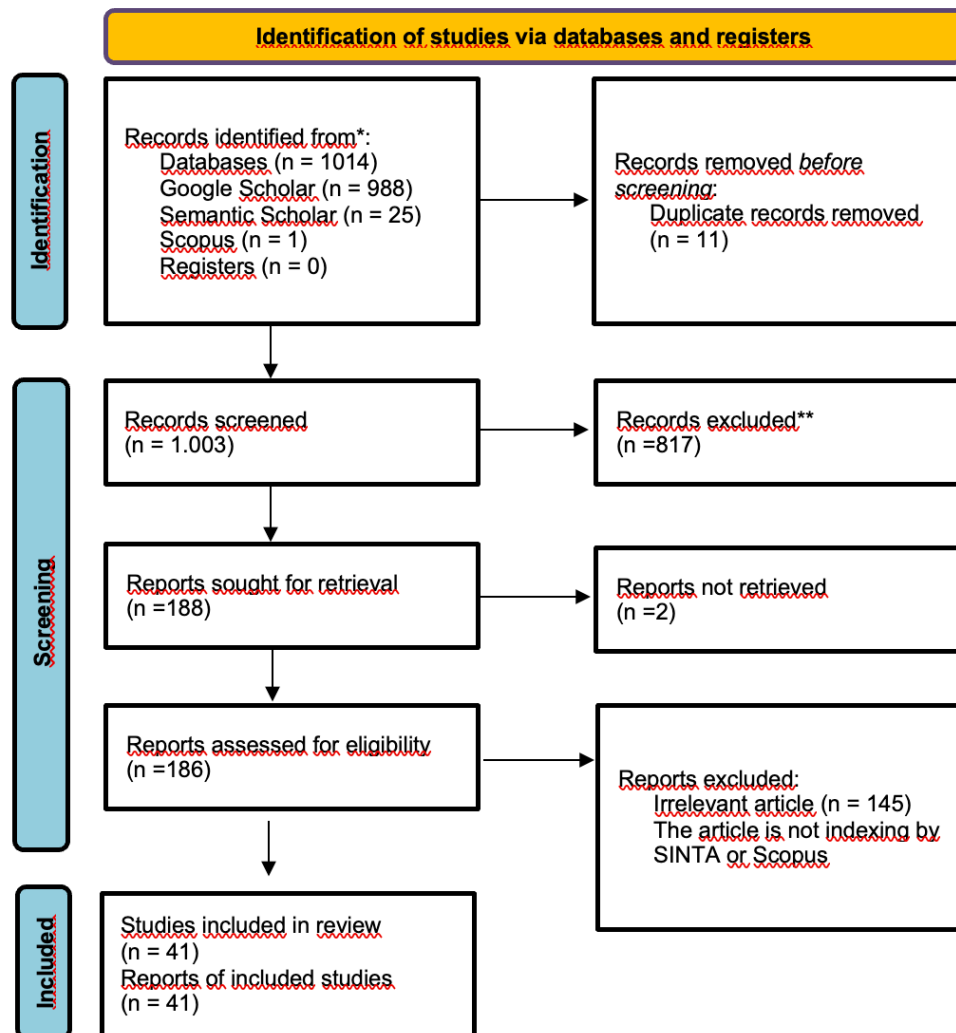


Figure 1. The flow of the selection processes

This review holds significant value for disseminating research results and functions as a resource for other researchers in exploring the same subject. The initial search yielded 1014 articles. After removing duplicates and conducting preliminary screening based on the relevance of titles and abstracts, 186 articles remained. Moreover, through a depth analysis assessing the alignment with the research focus, 41 final articles were identified as relevant and qualified to serve as the core sources of this SLR. The literature selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA, which depicts

the sequential screening process from identification to inclusion. This diagram serves as a visual reference that demonstrates the systematic and transparent selection procedure applied throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic literature review approach used in this study focused on identifying progressivism as a philosophical foundation in the Merdeka Curriculum. Several protocols were designed before starting the initial search and establishing the review. The review limited its scope to progressivism and the Merdeka Curriculum. The search results returned a significant number of articles, but the articles were limited to the years spanning from 2015 - 2025 because, based on previous searching, the most relevant articles related to the topics were published within this period. The most important protocol was the development of criteria for the exclusion and inclusion of studies to minimize irrelevant information and data. The search process was conducted in three distinct databases, namely Scopus, Semantic Scholar, and Google Scholar. There were 1014 articles found related to the topics, which consisted of 988 articles from Google Scholar, 25 articles from Semantic Scholar, and only 1 article found in the Scopus database related to the topic and keywords included. Based on the guidelines of systematic literature reviews, exclusion and inclusion criteria were implemented, leaving a final set of relevant articles for the analysis. In addition, we considered only 41 articles. Only articles published in the SINTA or Scopus indexes were selected and analyzed to develop an appropriate strategy for searching the literature.

The PRISMA approach was used, following the guidelines that show the results of the SLR at different stages of identification, screening, and included is shown in Fig. 1. The articles found and filtered related to the purposes were used to answer the research questions. The findings are presented based on the arising key themes, namely (1) the alignment of Progressivism and the goal of Merdeka Curriculum, (2) challenges in implementing a progressivist approach within the education system of Indonesia, (3) promising models for progressivist educational practice in Indonesia.

RQ 1. To what extent do the stated goals of Merdeka Curriculum align with the core principles of progressivism?

The findings indicate a strong philosophical alignment between the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum and the principles of progressivism (Listrianti & Nuzulah, 2025; Yustiana, 2023; Imran et al, 2024; Wahdah, 2024). Progressivism serves as a conceptual framework that provides meaning to the educational goals of implementing the Merdeka curriculum (Alwanda & Saputra, 2025). The foundation of progressive philosophy has brought positive changes and influences to the Merdeka curriculum when implemented in schools. It aims to create responsive, holistic education (Mahmud et al, 2024; Rahman & Robandi, 2024), strengthening student character, creativity, and independence (Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2024), and promoting flexible, character-based, and student-centered learning approaches (Waly et al, 2025). The principle of progressivism is student-centered (Ramadani & Desyandri, 2022; Nurjannah & Fauziah, 2025; Nissa & Suastra, 2023) and positions students as

active subjects, teachers as facilitators, and provides freedom for students to express their ideas and interests. This orientation also increases confidence, critical thinking, and creativity, that force to create a dynamic learning environment based on the students' needs and development (Nikma, 2023; Putri et al, 2023).

In addition, Progressivist learning within the Merdeka Curriculum provides a chance for students to develop their abilities based on need and interest rather than following an inflexible learning process (Nugraha et al, 2025; Mustagfiroh, 2020; Sopacua & Fadli (2022). Both progressivism and Merdeka Belajar provide flexibility for educational institutions to design contextual and student-centered learning processes. Flexibility and Freedom were also identified as principles between progressivism and the Merdeka Curriculum (Cahyani & Suastra, 2023; Wahyuni et al, 2023; Kulsum & Erlitawanty, 2023; Pardini et al, 2025). As stated, progressivism emphasizes flexibility in learning that creates space for rapid adaptation to changes and dynamics within the learning environment (Ngongo & Sudiarta, 2024), and reflects a flexible and student-centered approach, preparing learners to navigate societal and global demands effectively (Oktariani et al, 2024). The flexibility term relates to contextual learning in which the curriculum encourages teachers to adapt instruction based on students' needs and abilities rather than applying a single standardized approach (Mustaghfiroh, 2020; Arma & Ismail, 2024). This concept is also associated with the capacity of education to respond to societal changes and global demands, adapting to changing times (Faiz & Kurniawaty, 2020; Yunaini et al, 2022).

However, offering an alternative conceptual perspective, Amaruddin et al (2024) examined progressivism and humanism through *Totto-Chan*. It emphasized meaningful learning, student independence, equality, self-reflection, and environmental awareness that are relevant to the Merdeka Curriculum. The findings were treated as a distinct philosophical contribution rather than being combined with evidence of classroom implementation. In conclusion, the findings of previous studies indicated strong philosophical alignment between the Merdeka Curriculum and progressivism.

RQ 2. What are the challenges in implementing a progressivist approach in the education system of Indonesia?

Limited Teacher Readiness and Competence

Teacher readiness constitutes one of the most persistent barriers (Pardini et al, 2025; Nurjannah & Fauziah, 2025). Many teachers demonstrated low readiness in implementing progressivism, a lack of creativity in designing learning activities, limited pedagogical competency, and limited understanding of approaches required by the Merdeka Curriculum (Yunus & Latief, 2023; Listrianti & Nuzulah, 2025; Waly et al, 2025; Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2024). In this case, Waly et al. (2025) provided a more specific finding that many teachers are unfamiliar with approaches like formative assessment, differentiated instruction, and project-based learning.

Limited Resources, Instructional Time, Professional Support, and Institutional Constraints

Limited resources and professional support were the other challenges in implementing progressivism in the education system. Several previous studies reported inadequate resources, limited institutional support, limited access to teacher training and professional support (Bisri et al, 2023; Syammary et al, 2024; Khotimah & Susanti, 2025; Handayani, 2024; Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2024; Imran et al, 2024; Listrianti & Nuzulah, 2025). In this case, Bisri et al. (2023) identified limitations of resource constraints and limited institutional support as the key challenges in implementing the Merdeka curriculum. Khotimah and Susanti (2025) similarly reported limited socialization of the Merdeka Curriculum and limited readiness of resources. Specifically, Handayani (2024) highlighted the lack of teacher training and the provision of learning materials. While, Listrianti and Nuzulah (2025) specifically identified insufficient digital infrastructure and students' persistent reliance on traditional learning habits as other challenges in implementing progressivism in the education system. In addition, the transition to the implemented Merdeka curriculum requires changes in the way teachers teach and how they adapt learning material (Handayani, 2024). Beyond these factors, systemic and structural challenges also play a significant role, including that the socialization of the Merdeka Curriculum remains limited.

Limited time is a key challenge in implementing progressivism as a specific classroom-level challenge. Evidence from Lestari et al. (2024) shows that teachers had implemented learning cycles and differentiated learning, but they also faced limited time to develop differentiated instruction for individual learner requirements. Imran et al, (2024) also identified limited time as an obstacle to implementation.

Students' Diversity and Different Levels of Understanding

Diversity among students becomes an additional difficulty for student-centred implementation. Yunus & Latief (2023) stated that students exhibit varying levels of ability, interest, and self-confidence, which make it challenging to implement a student-centred approach consistently, while Imran et al. (2024) also identified varying levels of student understanding as a challenge in implementing it consistently across an entire classroom. Moreover, differences in students' abilities, interests, and levels of self-confidence influence their participation and engagement in learning activities. Many students were dependent on traditional learning habits, that makes them felt difficult to adjust to student-centered learning approaches.

RQ 3. What emergent models of successful progressivist practice are evident in the implementation of Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia?

To answer the third research question, several models of progressivist educational practice have emerged within the Indonesian education context, particularly in relation to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These models in teaching reflect the progressivist philosophy that has emerged in the Indonesian education context, particularly in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Based on the synthesis, project-based learning is the most dominant and reported model. Project-based learning promotes active, collaborative, and contextual learning. It is identified as a form of curriculum implementation (Cahyani & Suastra,

2023; Listrianti & Nuzulah, 2025). According to Sari & Maemonah (2024), Project-based learning is related to the principles of progressivism that promote student-centered learning, encourage active student participation, and foster collaborative learning. It can encourage teamwork and creativity (Pardini et al, 2025), encourage innovative teaching practices, promote engagement, skill-building (Oktariani et al, 2024), critical thinking, and student autonomy (Waly et al, 2025). Syammary et al. (2024) also identified project-based learning as a way to be active in asking questions and solving problems collaboratively. The findings were also supported by Simamora & Pasaribu (2023) that active learning through group discussions and creative projects connected to everyday life.

Another adopted approach is experiential learning, which refers to *learning by doing*, and is also an effective model that emphasizes experience and problem-solving processes to enhance student engagement and understanding. Ayatillah et al (2025) point out Experiential learning (learning by doing), democratic participation, and reflective evaluation through entrepreneurial activities. This result relates to project-based learning, but because it focuses on direct experience, engagement, and reflection, it is kept as an experiential learning form. In addition, another adopted approach is collaborative learning, which is commonly implemented through group discussions, peer learning, and community-based cooperation (Yustiana, 2023). Collaborative learning also emerges as a prominent model within progressivist educational practice (Imran et al, 2024; Wahdah, 2024). Other teaching and learning models that align with progressivism and can be implemented in the classroom include differentiated learning and discovery learning by fostering contextual, critical, and democratic learning (Nurjannah & Fauziah, 2025; Lestari, 2024). The previous studies indicate that differentiated learning supports the principle of student-centered learning. It provides opportunities for teachers to adapt instructional strategies and learning materials based on students' needs. Lestari (2024) shows that discovery learning, alongside project-based learning and differentiated learning, has been implemented to support learner-centered instructional practices within the Merdeka Curriculum.

The integration of technology in the learning process is essential (Bustanur et al, 2025). The use of technology as a supporting tool in the teaching process can build up the active participation of students. The progressivist model positions learners as active subjects and enables learning across time and place through technological support (Naatonis et al, 2022). The use of technology includes interactive media and game-based which play a significant role in supporting flexible learning that can take place anytime and anywhere (Wardani & Sahayu, 2024).

Discussion

Progressivist Alignment of the Merdeka Curriculum

The qualitative systematic literature review underscored a strong philosophical correlation between the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum and the principles of progressivism (Alwanda & Saputra, 2025; Mahmud et al, 2024; Rahman & Robandi, 2024; Cahyani & Suastra, 2023; Faiz & Kurniawaty, 2020; Nugraha et al, 2025; Listrianti & Nuzulah, 2025; Yustiana, 2023; Nikma, 2023; Wardani & Sahayu, 2024; Imran et al,

2024; Amaruddin et al, 2024). These include student-centered, educational freedom, flexibility, independence, relevance, holistic development (Wahyuni et al, 2023; Ngongo & Sudiarta, 2024; Kulsum & Erлитawanty, 2023; Mustaghfiroh, 2020; Nissa & Suastra, 2023; Pardini et al, 2025; Oktariani et al, 2024; Nurjannah & Fauziah, 2025; Yunaini et al, 2022; Waly et al, 2025; Rahman & Robandi, 2024; Ramadani & Desyandri, 2022; Sopacua & Fadli, 2022), critical thinking, and creativity (Putri et al, 2023; Juliangkary et al, 2023; Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2024). The results of the review, supported by Deng (2017), show that progressivism has been applied to change traditional teacher-centered methods into student-centered, experiential learning settings that foster democratic involvement and critical thinking.

In the learning process, the students are given freedom to express their opinions and participate actively, not just receive knowledge from the teachers (Budiwan & Malikah, 2022). As proclaimed by Dewey (1938), progressivism places the student at the center of the educational process, where real experience becomes the main medium in learning. The practical manifestation of this foundation can be seen in the *learning by doing* concept. Dewey's theoretical framework focused on the idea that every student is able to participate in and benefit from a dynamic and participatory society (Zaid et al., 2023). This finding contributes to curriculum studies by explaining that progressivism is related to the foundation of curriculum reform. Moreover, as international discussion, this finding contributes to learner-centered curriculum reform.

The findings can also be interpreted through constructivist learning theory. This theory emphasize the students actively participate and construct knowledge through experience and social interaction rather than receive knowledge from teachers. Learners use their prior knowledge as a foundation and build upon it as they acquire new information (Chand, 2023). In addition, freedom and active participation within the Merdeka Curriculum should be understood as independence occurs alongside collaboration, teacher facilitation, peer interaction, and social participation. The findings also show that flexibility is a crucial part of progressivism and the Merdeka Curriculum, in which the teachers and schools are given opportunities to adjust learning to students' needs, interests, and local contexts. The result of the study suggested that the curriculum aligns with progressivism and the guiding vision for educational reform in Indonesia.

The challenges in implementing the progressivist approach in the education system of Indonesia

Despite the strong alignment of progressivism and the Merdeka curriculum, the literature identifies several challenges in implementing the progressive approach within the Indonesian education system. Based on a synthesis of the reviewed studies, the challenges were limited teacher readiness and competence, limited resources and instructional time, and limited professional support and institutional constraints. In this case, teacher professional development should become a central priority in strengthening the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Directed training is able to better apply Merdeka Curriculum concepts, improve teaching quality, and create a dynamic learning environment (Taufik & Rindanigsih, 2024). Therefore,

resource and institutional support are needed in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Without sufficient resources, the implementation of progressive principles may vary significantly between schools. In this case, the need for well-trained teachers and adequate resources is very important (Syammary et al, 2004). Progressive education needs teachers to continuously evaluate and adapt instructional practices based on students' needs.

Other challenges relate to students' diversity and different levels of understanding. As stated by Yunus & Latief (2023), the varying students' abilities further hinder the consistent application of a student-centered approach. This challenge relates to the complexity of implementing student-centered approaches in diverse classrooms. It needs differentiated approaches to consider the students' diverse learning needs. The implementation of progressive education depends on the curriculum and teachers' ability to design learning environments that support diverse learners. The findings highlight the importance of teacher professional development, differentiated instruction, improving infrastructure, and suitable learning resources. These findings contribute progressive education depends on the interaction between educational philosophy and implementation realities. Therefore, progressivism required supportive environment and contextual strategies in success implementation.

Emerging Practices of Progressivist Education in Indonesia

Despite these challenges, the results of research identify the successful models for progressive educational practice in Indonesia. Based on the synthesis, project-based learning is the most dominant and reported model. Project-based learning is a very efficient tool to propel the capacity development of students (Wurdinger, 2016). Introducing project-based learning in teaching and learning activities helped the teachers to convey the material discussed, where curriculum objectives are realized optimally (Kamil et al, 2023). It is a model that dynamically engages students in various activities designed to produce learning outcomes (Praba et al, 2018). It can be implemented across various educational levels and subjects, with the teacher as the facilitator. In this case, emerging practices strengthen Dewey's (1938) argument that meaningful learning occurs through experience and active engagement. In addition, Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (Bronfman, 2007) further supports Project-based Learning activities, as learning with this model is more effective. Another adopted approach is experiential learning, which refers to *learning by doing*. Experiential learning within the Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities for students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical experiences. Moreover, experiential learning supports constructivist perspectives, particularly the idea that students develop knowledge through active exploration.

Another adopted approach is collaborative learning. Collaborative learning can involve group projects, peer learning activities, partnerships with industry experts, and community engagement initiatives (Yustiana, 2023). Collaborative learning experiences support group learning, encourage critical and creative problem-solving, and enhance cognitive understanding (Gillies, 2016). In a collaborative situation, student writers are impelled to make decisions about the language needed to express their ideas as they produce a text together (Teng, 2021). This finding relates to

Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist perspective that emphasizes that cognitive development occurs through social interaction and collaboration. Collaborative learning within the Merdeka Curriculum extends the role of students into active participants. Differentiated learning supports the progressive principle that education should respond to students' individual development. As stated by Wibowo et al (2025), Differentiated learning applies constructivist theory in learning by considering the individual characteristics of students. Moreover, differentiated instruction relies on a teaching approach that involves active teacher planning and appreciates the diversity within the classroom (Ferreira, 2025). Similarly, discovery learning develops understanding through active exploration and inquiry. Discovery learning helps students gain in-depth knowledge, develop cognitive skills, and increase engagement in specific topics (Stoffova, 2020).

In addition, the use of technology in the teaching process is very important to reach the learning objectives and can be seen as a progressive model, because the use of technology is aligned with the active learning principle. Technology-supported learning models provide opportunities for interactive and student-centered learning environments. It aligns with progressive principles when it enables students to become active learners who explore information. Using interactive media technology can involve students' active participation in the classroom (Rahayu & Bhaskoro, 2022). The integration of interactive media, digital platforms, and game-based technology is also reported as enhancing engagement and supporting students in gaining knowledge (Wardani & Sahayu, 2024; Imran et al., 2024; Bustanur et al., 2025; Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2024).

These findings highlight the relationship between progressivism, constructivism, and student agency. The integration of project-based learning, experiential learning, collaborative learning, differentiated learning, and discovery learning provides further evidence that progressivist curriculum reform requires a transformation of both teaching approaches and students' roles.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review research showed that the Merdeka curriculum has a strong align to progressivism philosophy, particularly the learning focused on students' active participation, experiential learning, and the teacher as the facilitator. The findings emphasize that the Merdeka Curriculum can be understood as a contemporary manifestation of progressivist thought within the context of Indonesian education. However, there were challenges in implementing the progressivist principle, including limited teacher readiness and competence, limited resources and instructional time, limited professional support, institutional constraints, and students' diverse understanding. In this case, these findings suggest that curriculum reform requires more than policy transformation and needs systemic changes involving teachers, schools, students, and educational stakeholders.

In addition, based on the results of the research, the synthesis further indicates learning models based on progressivism, such as project-based learning, experiential learning, collaborative learning, differentiated learning, discovery learning, and the use of technology in teaching. These models showed that the progressivism principle

can be operationalized contextually across various educational settings in Indonesia. This study highlights that progressivism remains a relevant theoretical foundation for educational reform; however, the successful implementation depends on continuous alignment between educational philosophy, curriculum policy, and classroom practice. This study contributes on educational system by reviewing how progressive principles can be adapted within the context of contemporary curriculum reform in Indonesia. Future research should not only focus on Indonesia education system but also explore progressive education and curriculum reform in other Asian contexts, which will provide broader insights into how progressive principles are adapted and implemented within educational settings.

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