

Analysis of the Independent Curriculum from the Perspective of Paulo Freire's Conscientization Concept: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes freedom of learning and deep learning, but studies examining the extent to which this curriculum facilitates critical consciousness (*conscientização*) as defined by Paulo Freire remain limited. This study aims to map the points of the tension between the elements of the Merdeka Curriculum and Freire's concept of critical consciousness. The study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method. Data were drawn from journal articles, academic books, and other relevant sources. The results reveal three points of points: a student-centered learning orientation and the humanization of education; the alignment of deep learning with Freire's problem-based education and praxis; and the shift in the teacher's role toward that of a facilitator and the establishment of dialogic relationships. However, three tensions were identified: autonomy that tends to be technocratic and market-oriented; standardized assessments and administrative burdens that have the potential to give rise to a "neo-banking system"; and an emphasis on individual competencies over collective consciousness. The novelty of this study lies in the conceptual distinction between cognitive critical thinking and *conscientização*, as well as the systematic mapping of elements of the national curriculum against Freire's framework. These findings provide a conceptual foundation ensuring that deep learning does not stop at critical thinking skills but also incorporates dialogue, reflection, and praxis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a crucial role in shaping the civilization of a nation. Through education, values can be instilled to grow and develop as a guide in facing the increasingly complex challenges of global life (Murdiono et al., 2020). The curriculum plays a strategic role as a guideline for directing the learning process for both educators and students. As a systematically designed educational framework, the curriculum serves as the foundation for the implementation of learning so that educational goals can be achieved in a focused manner in accordance with the objectives of National Education (Waqfin et al., 2024). Article 3 of Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System states: The development of students so that they become individuals who have faith and piety toward God the Almighty, possess noble character, are healthy, knowledgeable, competent, creative, independent, and become democratic and responsible citizens. The goals of national education hold a very important position as a foundation for running education in Indonesia. Every implementation and direction of education policy should essentially be oriented towards achieving these goals. The formulation of national education goals can also give an idea of the direction and character of the nation that we want to build through the education process. Education is an effort carried out by humans in a planned way to improve human quality, to make them care for others, to have good morals, so that they can uphold the values of unity and togetherness in a dignified life (Ajila, 2020). Because that goal has been set in the law, its existence has binding power for all elements of the nation, especially for those involved in planning, managing, and carrying out education in Indonesia.

The Merdeka Curriculum was created as a learning guideline focused on giving schools, teachers, and students the freedom to integrate students' needs and interests. The Merdeka Curriculum was developed as part of an effort to address disparities in student achievement, particularly in literacy and numeracy skills. This curriculum is intended to improve and refine the previous curriculum system through an approach that is more adaptive to learning needs. Its implementation is carried out in phases, taking into account the readiness level and conditions of each educational institution, so that the implementation process can proceed effectively and in accordance with the characteristics of each school (Priantini et al., 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum gives students the freedom to learn independently and flexibly, thereby fostering a culture of creative and innovative learning, critical thinking, and the freedom to express opinions. Thus, teachers are no longer the sole source of truth; instead, students collaborate with one another to seek the truth (Siswadi, 2022). However, putting it into practice on the ground isn't as easy as it's explained in theory. Schools that are just starting to implement the independent curriculum are still facing various challenges, like the lack of really clear information about how to carry it out in practice (Wantiana & Melissa, 2023). In their research, Amalliyah et al., (2025) found that even though various learning methods aimed at developing critical thinking skills have been applied, students still have weaknesses in evaluating information and drawing conclusions. This shows that students are not yet fully able to deeply evaluate information and systematically draw conclusions from the available information. Similarly, in the research by Dinati et al., (2025), three forms of learning assessment include three main types, namely diagnostic, formative, and summative, each serving a different function in supporting the effectiveness of learning. The dominance of summative assessments in learning practices makes the education process more result-oriented than process-oriented. This situation has the potential to reinforce a competitive culture in schools, while also raising questions about the extent to which the Merdeka Curriculum truly creates liberating learning experiences. This criticism is highly relevant to the current educational system, which typically focuses more on standardization and the assessment of learning outcomes than on fostering students' critical thinking skills (Risqi et al., 2026). The learning process should not merely consist of teachers delivering instructional material. Educators should view their students as active participants in the learning process. In this way, teachers can foster a sense of curiosity in their students (Umam & Nadlir, 2026). This situation resembles a "banking" style of education, and the criticism raised by Paulo Freire has had a significant impact on today's education system, which often focuses more on standardization and the assessment of learning outcomes than on fostering students' critical awareness (Risqi et al., 2026). Paulo Freire argues that the concept of education should not be one in which the teacher is the all-knowing subject and the student is the obedient object, as this approach fails to encourage students to discover themselves and their environment as whole human beings. In his book *Pedagogy of Liberation*, he outlines an educational approach aimed at helping students understand issues of injustice and inequality in society and learn how to address them. This approach utilizes discussion-based methods that allow students to actively engage in the learning process (Aimar, 2024). According to Freire, the primary goal of education is to help students develop critical thinking skills so that they can understand the social conditions around them and actively participate in creating positive change in society (Khalisa et al., 2026).

Previous studies have examined the Merdeka Curriculum from different perspectives. Priantini et al. (2022) focused on curriculum flexibility, project-oriented learning, and teacher autonomy, while Aimar (2024) explored the relevance of Freire's critical thinking concepts to critical reasoning in the Merdeka Curriculum at the primary school level, emphasizing similarities in their rejection of passive learning. Meanwhile, Hidayat (2025) critically examined implementation-related challenges, including assessment practices, teachers' administrative workloads, the procedural implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Project (P5), and teachers' readiness, interpreting these issues

through Freire's critical pedagogy. Although these studies provide valuable insights into curriculum orientation, critical thinking, and implementation challenges, they have not collectively offered a systematic mapping of the broader elements of the Merdeka Curriculum against Freire's concept of *conscientização*, including both points of convergence. Consequently, the extent to which the curriculum's principles may support the development of students' critical consciousness through dialogue, reflection, and praxis requires further conceptual examination. To address this gap, the present study systematically reviews relevant academic literature to analyze the relationship between the Merdeka Curriculum and Freire's critical consciousness framework, with the aim of clarifying the curriculum's potential to support students' intellectual, and social development while fostering critical engagement with social reality.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method (library research) that is developed systematically to analyze the Merdeka Curriculum from the perspective of Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness (*conscientização*). The data analysis technique used is content analysis, a method used to study the content of communication systematically, objectively, and in depth regarding the messages presented in various literary sources. To make the analysis process replicable, the search and selection of literature are carried out through several structured stages with clearly defined parameters.

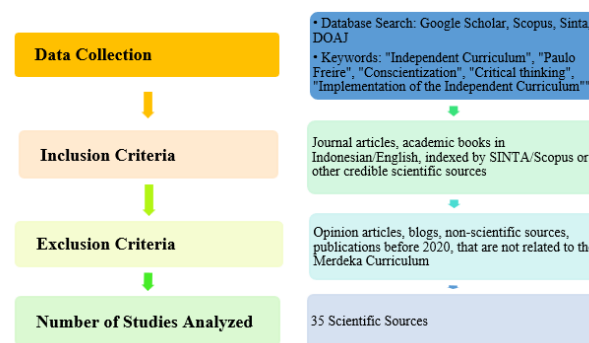


Figure 1. Flowchart of the Stages of Choosing Literature and Data Sources

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Merdeka Curriculum

The National Curriculum is a set of learning guidelines established by a country's government for use in that country's education system. It is a general guide that outlines what students must be taught and learn at various levels of education, from kindergarten through college. The National Curriculum typically includes various subjects or fields of study that must be taught, competency standards that students must achieve at each level of education, recommended teaching methods, and methods for measuring and evaluating student learning outcomes (Faiz et al., 2023). Muhaimin and Abdul Mujib explain that, based on its functions, a curriculum comprises seven aspects, including: 1) as a program of study, 2) content containing information, 3) planned activities, 4) the outcomes of learning, 5) cultural reproduction among the younger generation, 6) learning experiences, and 7) a tool used in education to produce outcomes that can be utilized collectively (Bahri, 2017). The Merdeka Curriculum was born out of social circumstances and was implemented with the goal of addressing the issues that arose from the 2013 curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum has its own distinctive characteristics, namely a greater focus on students by taking into account their talents and interests so that their potential can develop fully. The Merdeka Curriculum can serve as a bridge for

students who are gifted in their respective fields, enabling them to thrive over time, particularly in the face of rapidly evolving science and technology (Munawir et al., 2024). The curriculum acts as the central framework that organizes and guides all activities within the educational process. It not only provides an organized structure for the learning process but also reflects the hopes and needs of society, while serving as a tool to shape a future generation that is well-qualified and ready to face future challenges (Waqfin et al., 2024). Critical thinking is one of the skills people need to process information logically, systematically, and objectively. Through critical thinking, we can remain committed to the goals we continually strive for, as critical thinking helps us better understand the current state of the world. People who think critically understand that they are not objects but subjects, they realize that they are the creators of culture and will choose to take action on their own to bring about change in everything that holds them back (Aimar, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum consists of three parts: (1) learning continues to use the K13 framework with a new approach namely, a vision and mission that focuses on students' ability to learn independently, (2) teaching methods shift to be student-centered rather than solely content-centered, (3) the learning process is more flexible, so students do not have to master all the material but instead tailor their learning to their individual talents and interests (Jannah, 2022).

The Merdeka Curriculum was developed as an effort to respond to the increasingly noticeable learning crisis caused by learning gaps and losses in Indonesia. This curriculum gives schools and teachers more flexibility to tailor learning to the needs of students, while also emphasizing mastery of essential material, competency development, and character building. This approach encourages a shift in the learning paradigm from just delivering material to learning that is more student-centered, meaningful, and in-depth (deep learning) (Nugraha, 2022).

Table 1. Comparison of the Independent Curriculum vs. Paulo Freire's Thinking

Analysis Dimension	Independent Curriculum	Paulo Freire's Thoughts	Connection
Main Goal	Developing talents/interests, learning efficiency, and readiness for the working world/technology (Munawir et al., 2024).	Raising critical awareness (conscientização) and emancipation from oppression (Freire, 1970).	Tension between technocratic/market efficiency vs. political-social liberation.
Learning Method	The Independent Curriculum, with a focus on deep learning.	Problem-Posing Education & Inter-Subject Dialogue.	Students are not placed as individuals who actively construct understanding through experiences, questions, dialogue, reflection, and engagement with the reality around them.
The Role of Teachers and Students	Teachers as facilitators; students as the center of learning (student-centered) (Jannah, 2022).	Dialogical relationship: Teacher-Student and Student-Teacher teach each other.	Approaching a dialogic concept, but the teacher bureaucracy still hinders emancipatory dialogue.
Awareness Orientation	Focus on developing individual skills and Pancasila values.	Focus on collective awareness for social-community transformation.	The Independent Curriculum risks falling into individualism if it ignores solidarity and social responsibility.

Table 1 shows that the Merdeka Curriculum and Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy have some similarities, including: 1) A focus on student-centered learning and the humanization of education. The Merdeka Curriculum places students' interests, talents, and needs at the center of learning activities (Munawir et al., 2024). This aligns with Freire's principle of humanization, which rejects the treatment of students as empty vessels. Differentiated instruction in the Merdeka Curriculum values the uniqueness of each individual, encouraging students to become active agents in constructing their own knowledge. 2) In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, the orientation toward deep learning and the concept of praxis (Problem-Posing Education). In Freire's view, the concept of praxis is the integration of reflection and concrete action to transform social reality. In the Merdeka Curriculum, deep learning provides a contextual space for students, positioning them not merely as recipients of knowledge, but as individuals who actively construct understanding through experience, questioning, dialogue, reflection, and engagement with the reality around them. This bears a substantive resemblance to Freire's problem-posing education model, in which the realities of life serve as the subject of critical reflection. 3) Flexibility in the Teacher's Role as Facilitator and Dialogue Partner Within the rigid structure of the K13 curriculum, teachers are often confined to the role of one-way content deliverers. The Merdeka Curriculum encourages a shift in the teacher's role from sole authority figure to facilitator (Jannah, 2022). This shift aligns with Freire's dialogical principle, in which the teacher-student relationship transforms into a "teacher-student" and "student-teacher" dynamic where both learn from one another through deep dialogue. Although there is rhetorical convergence, critical analysis reveals fundamental differences and structural tensions between these two concepts: 1) The primary goal of "freedom": Technocratic Market Adaptation vs. Emancipatory Critical Consciousness. The fundamental difference lies in the ultimate goal of "freedom." Freedom in the Merdeka Curriculum tends to be oriented toward work readiness, technocratic efficiency, and adaptation to the demands of the market as well as science and technology (Munawir et al., 2024). Conversely, freedom according to Freire is politico-social emancipation aimed at dismantling structures of oppression and fostering critical consciousness (*conscientização*) so that students do not become tools for the reproduction of the capitalist system. 2) The concept of "freedom" in the Merdeka Curriculum is more often understood in an administrative and procedural context rather than as liberation in epistemological or pedagogical aspects. Teachers and schools do have more room to choose their learning approaches compared to the previous curriculum, but that freedom still operates within a framework of centralized policies and relies on technocratic tools like national assessments, digital platforms, and performance indicators (Situmorang et al., 2025). But in reality, it's not truly free, there's still space for the government to regulate things in practice. Assessments that focus on cognitive standardization and bureaucratic administrative burdens for teachers often reduce the freedom to learn to merely meeting technical achievement targets without touching on critical reflection on social realities. 3) Competence Individualism vs. Collective Awareness The liberation of the Merdeka Curriculum places a strong emphasis on pragmatically developing students' individual talents (Jannah, 2022). Meanwhile, Freire's pedagogy emphasizes that critical awareness cannot be achieved individually, but through collective dialogic movements for solidarity and social transformation together.

3.2 Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum to Enhance Critical Thinking Skills

In facing various challenges in the 21st century, students need to be equipped with the 4Cs: critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and innovation, communication, and collaboration, known as 21st-century skills to ensure their global competitiveness (Nurhayati et al, 2024). In addition, this curriculum focuses on learning that fosters higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). The function of the curriculum as a process of social reconstruction is viewed as a means to equip children with the skills necessary to become active members of society not merely passively accepting or adapting to existing conditions, but also creatively and innovatively shaping their lives toward greater

quality and productivity (Amarta, 2024). Various strategies employed by teachers in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum during instruction include focusing on methods that engage students, teachers reviewing students' prior knowledge of material covered the previous week, teachers encouraging students to actively ask questions or critique phenomena they directly experience in their daily lives, and providing students with space to express their ideas and concepts as material for classroom discussion. The Merdeka Curriculum provides educators with the opportunity to create creative and relevant learning processes that meet local needs and prepare students to face global challenges. With this method, learning activities are not only centered on the transfer of information but also on character building, critical thinking skills, creativity, and collaboration (Bait et al., 2025). Teachers serve as the spearhead of the learning process, but students also play a vital role as drivers of civilization. The old-style education model where teachers lecture and students listen, teachers are seen as all-knowing and students must obey fails to recognize that teachers are not the sole source of knowledge. If students are viewed merely as objects to be commanded, this stifles their ability to acquire knowledge from any source (Freire, 2019). Implementation is a critical aspect to consider, as the essence of any educational activity lies in its implementation. No matter how well-planned or organized an educational activity may be, if it is not accompanied by proper implementation, it will be difficult to achieve the goals of that activity. In the implementation of the curriculum at every educational institution, there are principles that support the achievement of curriculum implementation, namely providing equal opportunities, a student-centered approach, collaboration and partnership, as well as consistency in policy (Yunita et al., 2023).

The Merdeka Curriculum grants students full autonomy to develop their individual potential without being compared to their peers. One indicator of progress in enhancing students' critical thinking skills is when they begin to reflect on and solve real-world social problems. A holistic approach is essential in education in this modern era, where students actively participate in the learning process to contextualize the knowledge provided by their teachers. The educational system proposed by Freire emphasizes that education must be a practice of freedom, not a practice of domination. Liberating education provides students with the opportunity to think independently, engage in dialogue, and actively participate in the learning process (Khalisa et al., 2026). Freire asserts that people must understand and critically analyze the root causes of problems, only then can they take truly innovative actions for change. The oppressed do not need to fight for freedom because they have already adapted to and resigned themselves to oppression (Maulana et al., 2025). The Merdeka Curriculum encompasses various approaches and techniques tailored to students' needs so they can achieve the desired skills and objectives, or learn independently (Wulandari et al., 2024).

In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, critical thinking can be understood as students' ability to analyze information, understand issues, and find solutions to learning problems. However, this ability does not necessarily automatically develop into critical consciousness as defined by Paulo Freire, because critical consciousness also requires students to understand social reality, question injustice, and reflect on the relationship between knowledge and real life. Conversely, conscientização in Freire's thought is a process of political and social awareness that goes far beyond technical cognitive abilities (Freire, 2019). However, research by Kullo et al. (2024) on the barriers to improving students' critical thinking skills includes: a focus on standardized tests, a lack of teacher training, and the fact that some teachers still do not fully understand how to teach their students to think critically. The solutions that must be implemented include: conducting teacher training and competency development, managing a supportive learning environment, and fostering collaboration between parents and students in the educational process. Paulo Freire's educational philosophy introduces the concept of dialogic education or problem-based education. In the dialogic educational approach, both teachers and students serve as active participants in the learning process. This emphasizes an equal relationship between teachers and students. Teachers are no longer viewed as

the sole source of knowledge but rather function as guides who support students in addressing the challenges they face. (Khalisa et al., 2026). This approach aims to strengthen dialogue and foster social awareness through an in-depth analysis of the realities of everyday life. This approach encourages students and teachers to work as partners in critical inquiry, identify social issues, and understand existing structures of injustice. Through interconnected processes of reflection and action, this form of education aims to empower individuals to bring about social transformation oriented toward justice and equality (Cahyani, 2025). Within the context of Paulo Freire's perspective, teachers play a role in supporting students to develop critical skills and address challenges. Student engagement is a primary focus in the learning process and supports them in developing critical reasoning skills (Umam & Nadlir, 2026). Meanwhile, students serve as subjects of learning, critical thinkers, and active agents of social change who construct their own knowledge through dialogue and experience (Kurniawan et al., 2026). This aligns with the research by Madhakomala et al. (2022), which found that Freire's pedagogy of liberation shares similarities with the self-directed learning curriculum we are currently beginning to explore namely, that both grant students the freedom to express their opinions and engage in discussions with their teachers during learning activities.

The learning model offered in the Merdeka Curriculum is deep learning. Deep Learning is an approach that honors by emphasizing the creation of a learning atmosphere and a learning process that is conscious, meaningful, and enjoyable through holistic and integrated thinking, feeling, sensing, and physical activities (Kemendikdasmen, 2025). The concept of conscientização relates not only to a person's ability to think critically but also to the awareness needed to understand various issues and injustices occurring in social life. Individuals are encouraged to see the connection between the knowledge they acquire and the real-world conditions in their surroundings, including an understanding of various forms of inequality and power relations. For Freire, this awareness must not stop at merely understanding or reflecting on an issue. Critical consciousness must be realized through praxis that is, the connection between reflection and concrete action aimed at improving or transforming social conditions deemed unjust (Susanto, 2016; Fahmi et al., 2021). Without the dimensions of emancipatory action and political consciousness, even the highest level of critical thinking will merely become a tool for technocratic adaptation within the existing system, rather than a means of liberation.

3.3 Critical Thinking According to Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire, a leading figure in education, was born on September 19, 1921, in Recife a small city in northeastern Brazil in a region considered poor and underdeveloped. Throughout his career in education, Freire made numerous contributions. When he was appointed professor of the history and philosophy of education at the University of Recife, he devoted his energy to tackling the problem of illiteracy faced by thousands of poor farmers in the Northeast. Through the literacy program he created, he succeeded in engaging adults who could not read or write to learn in just 45 days. The key to the success of Freire's method was the process of conscientização (awareness-raising), which he used to explain true education by involving individuals in the political context through the ability to read and write. This was considered a goal that the entire Brazilian society should be able to achieve. Freire succeeded in capturing the attention of the poor and giving them hope that they would begin to have a voice in broader issues concerning life in Brazil (Aimar, 2024). Paulo Freire views education as inseparable from the social reality faced by human beings. Education takes place within the context of a society characterized by social relations. Therefore, education serves as a means of maintaining the existing social order, but it can also become a means of liberation when it empowers people to critically understand and reflect on the reality of their lives. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire discusses the relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed, as well as how conditions of oppression can influence human consciousness. In this regard, critical education

is aimed at helping people understand the reality they face, recognize various forms of injustice, and develop the ability to be sensitive to their social reality (Freire, 2019). According to Freire, conscientization in general, and even more so focuses on transforming interactions between individuals to correct the distortions caused by humans themselves. Conscientization is not merely a method or the transfer of information, nor is it solely the development of skills rather, it is a dialogical process that brings everyone together to collectively address life's challenges (Fahmi et al, 2021). To achieve this goal, the process must involve a two-pronged approach: enhancing students' critical awareness while simultaneously striving to transform the social structures that perpetuate oppression, since human consciousness develops dialectically through the interaction between the self and the environment (Susanto, 2016). Another criticism is the "Banking Model of Education," in which students are viewed merely as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge by the teacher; the fuller the vessel, the more successful the teacher is at imparting knowledge to the students. However, the reality is that the communication that takes place is one-sided. In bank-style education, the teacher or educator is regarded as the central figure whom students must always follow. This belief can hinder students' ability to think critically and creatively, causing them to become reluctant to think for themselves (Husni, 2020).

The integration of the Merdeka Curriculum and Deep Learning can create learning that is adaptive, innovative, collaborative, and fits future needs (Wathon, 2024). The expected outcome in a deep learning approach is individuals who are able to think logically, analytically, and reflectively in understanding, evaluating, and processing information to solve problems (Kemendikdasmen, 2025). Although critical thinking and conscientização are interrelated, the two must be conceptually distinguished. Critical thinking focuses on learners' cognitive capacity to process information, analyze problems, and evaluate phenomena based on data and facts to find solutions. Developing critical thinking is essential so that learners do not merely become passive recipients of information, as in the "banking model" of education. In contrast, conscientização (social awareness) is not merely the transfer of information or the development of cognitive skills alone. Conscientização is a dialogical process that engages individuals within political and social contexts. Through conscientização, education not only encourages individuals to understand reality and recognize forms of social injustice but also pursues a dual movement: enhancing students' critical awareness while simultaneously striving to transform oppressive social structures through a dialectical relationship between the self and the environment in the pursuit of liberation. Thus, critical thinking functions as an element of cognitive analysis, whereas conscientização goes beyond it because it encompasses the dimensions of political awareness, sensitivity to social reality, and an orientation toward the transformation of social structures. Deep learning can be implemented through exploratory activities, in-depth discussions, analysis of real-world phenomena, group presentations, and reflection on the learning process (Rahmawati et al., 2025). The deep learning approach focuses on three main pillars that align with Freire's ideas, namely: 1) Meaningful learning, which highlights the importance of a student-centered approach in which students are given the opportunity to actively engage in the educational process. Therefore, students function not only as recipients of information but also as creators of knowledge. 2) Mindful learning, which in practice requires the design of activities that encourage students' reflection and self-awareness. Students participating in this context tend to have the ability to analyze information more deeply, evaluate various perspectives, and develop creative solutions to the challenges they face. 3) Joyful learning, is a positive, fun, challenging, and motivating learning environment. Students feel appreciated for their involvement and contributions to the learning process. Students are emotionally connected, making it easier to understand, remember, and apply knowledge. This principle can align with Freire's thinking on the aspect of dialogue, where there is respect for students and emotional connection (Kemendikdasmen, 2025).

DISCUSSION

The Merdeka Curriculum was created to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. This curriculum can be tailored to students' needs and characteristics, thereby helping them in the learning process without feeling burdened by educational activities. Essentially, the Merdeka Curriculum offers students flexibility in a self-directed learning process that can be adapted to current educational conditions. This aligns with Paulo's view of education, which provides students with the opportunity to experience freedom particularly in expressing their opinions and thoughts. When compared to Paulo's concept of liberating education, the Merdeka Curriculum can serve as an alternative for realizing the goals of Paulo's educational philosophy. This concept of liberating education is currently being implemented; through the "Merdeka" curriculum, the government aims to eliminate the ranking system. Since the ranking system which was once considered a measure of students' intelligence can in fact be aptly described as a "Silent Culture," according to Paulo. Oppression that ultimately leads to freedom, as Paulo states in his writings, can be achieved through education, because education raises individuals' awareness of the oppression they experience. This occurs because, through education, people are equipped to think critically about various specific issues and this is precisely what the "Merdeka" curriculum emphasizes. Based on Paulo Freire's educational philosophy, critical thinking is, in essence, the subject's capacity to objectively internalize reality and distinguish truth in its essence. When students are able to align themselves with reality, they can respond effectively to the dynamics of change, challenges, and problems. A more precise and accurate understanding of causality will deepen an individual's critical perspective on reality. To develop critical thinking skills in learning activities, students need to be strategically aware of their own positions and roles. The practice of learning is, at its core, a form of engagement with the realities of the world. This learning behavior assumes a dialectical relationship between educators and learners, in which the reflections of both are clearly manifested. Thus, a transformative learning process requires intellectual humility. The development of critical thinking skills can be optimized through dialogic methods. Dialogue serves as a tool for fostering critical awareness (conscientization), in which the relationship between educators and learners is built on an equal footing to jointly cultivate critical attitudes and reasoning. The transition to deep learning essentially restores the essence of freedom of thought according to Freire: that learning is not about how much material is covered, but rather how deeply students understand, internalize, and are able to apply that knowledge to impact social reality.

Freedom, in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, is essentially geared toward technocratic efficiency, the development of individual competencies, adaptation to science and technology, and readiness to enter the workforce. In contrast, freedom according to Freire is political and social emancipation aimed at dismantling structures of oppression and fostering critical consciousness (conscientização) so that students do not merely become tools for reproducing the existing socio-economic system. Reducing critical thinking to merely a cognitive ability for solving technical problems or analyzing factual data reveals the limitations of the Merdeka Curriculum. In practice, assessments that remain oriented toward cognitive standardization, coupled with the heavy bureaucratic administrative burden on teachers, risk giving rise to a new form of the "banking system" (neo-banking system). This reduces the essence of "Merdeka Belajar" to the fulfillment of technical achievement targets without ever engaging in critical reflection on reality and social inequalities. The Merdeka Curriculum is heavily focused on developing students' talents and potential in an individualistic and pragmatic manner. Meanwhile, Freire's pedagogy emphasizes that conscientization can't be achieved individually it requires a collective, dialogic movement based on social solidarity to transform unjust societal structures. So, without the dimension of political awareness and emancipatory action (praxis), high-level critical thinking skills in the Merdeka Curriculum would only serve as a technocratic adaptation tool within the existing system, rather than

as a true means of liberation. Although the Merdeka Curriculum brings a spirit of freedom in the learning process, its implementation in the field still faces various challenges. The assessment system, which still emphasizes cognitive achievement, and the substantial administrative burden on teachers, can limit the space for freedom in learning. This situation has the potential to make the learning process more focused on meeting targets and curriculum demands rather than encouraging students to understand and reflect on various social issues in their environment. On the other hand, teachers, who should be able to act as facilitators and partners in a dialogical learning process, still face various obstacles, especially related to administrative demands and understanding the philosophical foundations of the Merdeka Curriculum. Therefore, further research is needed to look at the factors affecting this situation, including teachers' readiness to implement student-oriented learning and the types of development and training needed. This way, teachers not only meet the technical demands of the curriculum but can also play a more active role in creating learning that is critical, reflective, and connected to students' social lives.

4. CONCLUSION

This literature review indicates that the Merdeka Curriculum has conceptual similarities with Paulo Freire's educational philosophy, particularly in its emphasis on student-centered learning, active participation, dialogue, and the development of critical thinking. These principles are consistent with Freire's concept of *conscientização*, which emphasizes the development of critical consciousness through reflection, dialogue, and critical engagement with social reality. The deep learning approach, particularly through meaningful, mindful, and joyful learning, also provides opportunities to support these educational aims. However, conceptual alignment does not necessarily guarantee the development of students' critical consciousness in educational practice. The literature reviewed highlights potential challenges related to assessment practices, administrative demands, and teachers' readiness to implement reflective and dialogical learning. These challenges raise questions about whether curriculum implementation consistently provides opportunities for students to question assumptions, evaluate information critically, and reflect on social issues in their environment. Therefore, the relationship between the Merdeka Curriculum and Freire's concept of *conscientização* should be understood not only in terms of shared educational principles but also in terms of how these principles are translated into classroom practices. Future empirical research should investigate teachers' readiness, assessment practices, and pedagogical strategies that support critical reflection and dialogue. Such research is necessary to understand the conditions under which the Merdeka Curriculum can contribute to the development of students' critical consciousness and meaningful engagement with social reality.

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