



Synergizing Humanistic Values and Holistic Learning in 21st-Century Education

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Abstract

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Global transformations driven by technological revolutions, globalization, and the COVID-19 pandemic have compelled education systems to adapt to the demands of the 21st century. Education must develop a balance between hard skills and soft skills to cultivate adaptive, creative, and character-driven generations. The *Merdeka Belajar* concept represents an educational innovation in Indonesia that promotes a paradigm shift from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning, aiming to strengthen the 4C competencies Critical Thinking, Creativity, Communication, and Collaboration. This article aims to analyze the relevance of integrating the 21st-century education paradigm with the humanistic-holistic approach within the *Merdeka Belajar* framework. Through a literature review of various scholarly sources, the study finds that character formation, social-emotional development, and 21st-century skills can be optimized through holistic and reflective learning designs. Therefore, the future educational paradigm must focus on achieving equilibrium between cognitive competence and humanistic values, ensuring learners not only master knowledge but also embody empathy, ethics, and adaptability in a rapidly changing global environment.



1. Introduction

The rapid global changes resulting from the Industrial Revolution 4.0, the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have reconstructed the global social and economic landscape. This transformation not only demands mastery of technology but also emphasizes the importance of adaptive capabilities and high social skills. According to Zain. (2021), global challenges encourage the educational world to prepare students with 21st-century skills, which include critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (4C). In this context, education no longer focuses solely on the knowledge transfer process but on forming individuals who are capable of becoming lifelong learners and adapting to complex changes.

The shift in educational paradigm from a teacher-centered model toward student-centered learning is a strategic step in responding to these demands. Learning models that place students at the center of the learning process provide space for the development of autonomy, responsibility, and reflective capacity toward their learning experiences (Utami et al., 2021). The role of the teacher is also undergoing transformation; they are no longer merely information providers but rather facilitators who guide students in constructing meaning through interaction, collaboration, and knowledge exploration. Such an approach aligns with the spirit of the Freedom to Learn *Merdeka Belajar* policy initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia as an effort to create a more adaptive and relevant learning system.

The *Merdeka Belajar* concept emphasizes freedom for both students and educational units in creating a flexible, relevant, and contextual learning environment aligned with future needs. In this paradigm, students are given the opportunity to optimize their potential through meaningful and experience-based learning (Jufriadi et al., 2022). In line with this, Santoso (2021) assert that effective learning must be able to integrate the mastery of hard skills and soft skills as the foundation for strengthening student character. Therefore, education that focuses solely on the cognitive aspect is no longer suitable for contemporary demands in forming the Pancasila student profile who is strongly characterized and adaptive to global changes.

Furthermore, the humanistic-holistic approach serves as the philosophical foundation for building an education system oriented toward the humanization of man. Education is directed not only at academic achievement but also at the development of students' social, emotional, spiritual, and moral dimensions. Rosidah et al. (2022) explain that strengthening soft skills such as empathy, cooperation, and leadership through reflective learning experiences can increase students' readiness to face the working world. Within this framework, the integration between the 21st-century education paradigm and the *Merdeka Belajar* policy with the humanistic-holistic approach becomes increasingly relevant for forming students who are whole, characterized, and possess global competitiveness.

Thus, this article aims to conceptually analyze the interconnection and integration between the 21st-century education paradigm, the *Merdeka Belajar* policy, and the humanistic-holistic approach as a comprehensive educational strategy for

developing student character, competence, and adaptability in the face of rapid global transformation. By exploring these three frameworks, the article seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how educational innovation can harmonize cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions in the learning process. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of aligning national education policies with global educational trends to cultivate students who are not only academically competent but also emotionally intelligent, socially responsible, and environmentally conscious. Ultimately, this analysis contributes to strengthening educational practices that foster lifelong learning, critical thinking, and sustainable human development in a complex and interconnected world.

2. Methods

This research employs a library research approach focusing on conceptual analysis and the synthesis of theories from various scientific sources related to 21st-century education, the *Merdeka Belajar* policy, and the humanistic-holistic approach. The literature study was conducted by collecting and reviewing relevant literature from both national and international journals in last five years range. The initial stage included the identification of keywords such as 21st-century education, 4C skills, student-centered learning, holistic education, and humanistic approach. The literature search process was carried out using the Google Scholar, Elsevier and Research Gate database to obtain credible and up-to-date references.

The collected data were then analyzed through the content analysis technique by tracing main concepts, examining the interrelation between variables, and

interpreting the conceptual meaning emerging in various literature. According to Chali et al. (2022), the literature study method is an effective research strategy for exploring theoretical phenomena and generating a comprehensive understanding of a specific topic through the synthesis of relevant literature. In the context of this research, a qualitative approach was used to deeply examine the philosophical values, educational principles, and empirical relevance of implementing the 21st-century education paradigm in Indonesia.

To maintain the validity and credibility of the data, each literature source was critically reviewed, considering the research context, methodological approach, and previous findings. The analysis process was carried out by considering the objectivity and suitability between the theory and the educational practice being studied. Findings from various sources were then thematically structured to produce an integrative conceptual framework, covering students' cognitive, affective, and social-emotional dimensions.

The analysis stages were carried out through three main processes: (1) data reduction, which is the selection and filtering of literature relevant to the research focus; (2) presentation and categorization of concepts, which aims to organize main ideas based on themes and their interrelationships; and (3) drawing conceptual conclusions, which is the synthesis of analysis results to build a complete understanding of the object of study. Through this process, a comprehensive mapping of the relationship between the 21st-century education paradigm, the *Merdeka Belajar* principles, and the humanistic-holistic approach was produced.

Thus, this study presents a theoretical synthesis that reinforces the understanding of how the integration between the 21st-century education paradigm and the humanistic-holistic approach can enrich the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy in Indonesia. The conceptual approach used not only provides a descriptive understanding but also offers a reflective perspective on the direction of national education development oriented toward strengthening student character and competence (Maryati et al., 2020)

3. Results

Significant changes in the 21st-century education system demand a paradigm shift from the traditional outcome-oriented education model toward a system that emphasizes process, competence, and character building. In the global context, 21st-century skills include basic literacy, higher-order thinking skills, and character qualities that form the foundation for individual success in social and professional life. Kembara et al. (2019) explain that the four main skills known as the 4C Critical thinking, Creativity, Communication, and Collaboration are essential competencies that need to be developed to address the increasingly complex and dynamic challenges of the working world. This paradigm demands that the education system not focus solely on the cognitive domain but also on developing students' affective and social-emotional potential.

In the Indonesian context, the *Merdeka Belajar* policy has strong relevance to the principles of 21st-century education because it provides freedom of thought, space for creativity, and autonomy for students to develop their competencies

through meaningful learning experiences (Jufriadi et al., 2022). Granting autonomy to teachers and educational units is a strategic step in opening up opportunities for learning innovation that is more relevant, flexible, and contextual to future needs. One important element in 21st-century education is the integration of hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills relate to measurable technical abilities, such as numeracy literacy and technology mastery, while soft skills include interpersonal abilities such as communication, empathy, and collaboration. The modern working world demands a balance between the two.

However, the conventional education system often still focuses solely on cognitive abilities and tends to disregard students' social and emotional aspects. Therefore, educational transformation needs to be directed toward a more holistic and humanistic learning model, to produce individuals who are not only intellectually smart but also emotionally and spiritually mature (Rosidah et al., 2022). Humanistic-holistic education places human beings at the center of the entire educational process. Its primary goal is to develop all of students' potential in a balanced manner, covering intellectual, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual aspects. According to Treve (2021), in the humanistic view, the learning process is a personal experience rooted in intrinsic motivation and the individual's real experience. In this context, teachers function not only as knowledge deliverers but also as facilitators and guides who help students find meaning in every learning process they undergo.

This educational model aligns with the philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara, which emphasizes the importance of humanizing people through the principles of *Ing ngarso sung tulodo* (Be an example in front), *Ing madyo mangun karso* (Generate

willingness in the middle), *Tut wuri handayani* (Give encouragement from behind). This philosophy places educators in three dynamic roles: as an example in front, a driving force in the middle, and an encourager from behind. In the context of 21st-century education, these principles are translated into the teacher's role as a facilitator, mentor, and collaborator who supports students in optimizing their potential (Santoso, 2021). The integration of the humanistic-holistic approach within the *Merdeka Belajar* policy also strengthens the development of students' social-emotional abilities through the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).

Social-emotional learning helps students develop self-awareness, empathy, social responsibility, and skills to manage emotions and establish interpersonal relationships. These aspects play a crucial role in forming student character that is resilient, possesses integrity, and has high social awareness. Furthermore, the application of 4C skills in the learning process needs to be designed in an authentic context that connects academic knowledge with life realities. One relevant model is Project-Based Learning (PjBL), which provides opportunities for students to apply their knowledge in solving real-world problems through collaboration and creativity. Sari et al. (2021) explain that this approach not only enhances critical thinking ability but also fosters students' intrinsic motivation because they feel they have an active role in their learning outcomes.

Nevertheless, the implementation of the humanistic-value-oriented 21st-century education paradigm still faces various challenges at the educational unit level. One main obstacle lies in teachers' limited understanding of the humanistic-holistic

principles, as well as limited facilities and time for implementing reflective learning. A study conducted by Kraft (2019) indicates that most educators still focus on narrow cognitive academic achievement and have not been optimal in developing students' social-emotional potential. Furthermore, the education evaluation system that still emphasizes cognitive results also becomes an obstacle in realizing education that is more contextual and humanizing. To overcome these various obstacles, curriculum reform is needed that places character education and social-emotional development on par with academic achievement.

The Merdeka Curriculum launched by the Indonesian government in 2022 has attempted to emphasize flexibility, learning differentiation, and the integration of character values in every subject. With this approach, education is expected to be no longer mechanistic but to become a liberating, meaningful, and relevant learning experience in students' real lives. Besides curriculum reform, strengthening teachers' professional capacity is a key factor in the successful implementation of 21st-century education. Ahmed et al. (2020) assert that improving teachers' pedagogical, social, and emotional competence has a significant influence on learning effectiveness. 21st-century teachers must have the ability to manage a collaborative classroom, facilitate creative discussions, and build an inclusive and positive learning climate. This is where the importance of the *Merdeka Belajar* policy lies as a space for innovation that provides freedom for educators to create and adjust teaching methods without being constrained by rigid administrative regulations.

The humanistic-holistic approach also demands the active involvement of parents and the community as part of the education ecosystem. The educational

process is not only the responsibility of the school but also a shared social responsibility that supports students' overall development. Agus et al. (2021) assert that collaboration among schools, families, and local communities can strengthen character education and build a sustainable learning culture. This aligns with the view of Ki Hajar Dewantara that education is a cultural process involving all dimensions of human life. Furthermore, holistic education also underscores the importance of ecological awareness and spirituality as an integral part of student character formation. In the era of globalization and increasing environmental crises, students need to be instilled with a sense of empathy toward nature and awareness of social responsibility as global citizens.

Thus, the ultimate goal of education is not only to produce technically skilled human resources but also to shape individuals who are ethical, caring, and committed to universal humanity. Conceptually, the integration between the 21st-century education paradigm, the *Merdeka Belajar* policy, and the humanistic-holistic approach forms an educational model that unites rationality, spirituality, and sociality. This model supports the formation of the *Pancasila* student profile who is faithful and devoted to the One God, possesses noble character, is globally diverse, independent, critically reasoned, creative, and has the spirit of mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*). In the long term, this integrated educational paradigm is expected to produce a generation of learners who are resilient, innovative, and capable of becoming agents of social change in the continuously developing digital era.

4. Conclusion

21st-century education demands learning that develops not only intellectual abilities but also students' character, social-emotional, and spiritual aspects. The integration of the 21st-century education paradigm with the *Merdeka Belajar* concept and the humanistic-holistic approach is a relevant conceptual solution in facing global change. Through a student-centered learning model, education can foster critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (4C) abilities that are combined with humanitarian values and national character. The humanistic-holistic approach encourages meaningful learning by positioning the teacher as a facilitator, not the center of knowledge. With the support of a flexible curriculum, teacher training, and collaboration among schools, families, and the community, the future education paradigm can be realized holistically and sustainably. Education is not just a tool to achieve work competence but a path to shaping individuals with character, ethics, and global competitiveness.

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