



Review
Article

The Relevance of John Dewey's Thinking to Contextual Learning in the Era of Independent Learning

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Abstract. The rapid transformation of education in the 21st century demands approaches that move beyond traditional, teacher-centered instruction toward models that are more student-centered, experiential, and contextually relevant. In Indonesia, this shift is embodied in the Independent Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*), which emphasizes curriculum flexibility, local contextualization, and the active role of teachers in adapting instruction to students' needs and environments. Within this context, John Dewey's philosophy of progressive education, which underscores learning through experience, critical reflection, and social engagement, offers an important theoretical foundation for understanding and strengthening contemporary pedagogical practices. This study aims to examine the relevance of Dewey's educational philosophy to the implementation of contextual learning within the Independent Curriculum by employing a qualitative descriptive approach based on library research. Drawing on analyses of Dewey's seminal works, educational policy documents, scholarly publications, and documented examples of curriculum application in schools such as SMAN 10 Kota Ternate, SDN Tomagoba Tidore, and SLB Sofifi in North Maluku, the study finds that Dewey's principles—learning by doing, real-life experience, and student-centered engagement—are strongly reflected in current practices of contextual learning. The documented evidence highlights positive outcomes, including increased student motivation, active participation, and improved effectiveness of the learning process. These findings affirm the enduring relevance of Dewey's educational philosophy in addressing the demands of 21st-century education and underscore the necessity of sustained policy support and continuous professional development for teachers to ensure the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum.

Keywords: John Dewey's thinking, Contextual Learning, Independent Learning Curriculum.

1. Introduction

The paradigm shift in education in the 21st century demands a transformation from traditional learning to a more contextual and learner-centered model [1]. In Indonesia, the Merdeka Belajar policy reinforces this direction by emphasizing curriculum flexibility, teacher empowerment, and the relevance of learning to students' local contexts. This creates an urgent need to evaluate the philosophical foundations of the proposed learning approach. John Dewey, a key figure in the philosophy of progressivism education, viewed education as an active process based on real-life experiences and critical reflection. These principles align closely with the principle of Freedom to Learn, which allows students the freedom to explore their abilities and interests in a real-world environment [2].

Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) integrates teaching materials with students' daily experiences, so that knowledge becomes more meaningful and applicable [3]. concluded that CTL is able to increase learning motivation, active student involvement, as well as critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Several global bibliometric studies have noted an increase in research interest in CTL in the last decade, including 782 articles on science education indexed by Scopus between 2010 and 2022.

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This indicates that CTL is not a local phenomenon, but is growing internationally as an effective learning strategy [4].

The urgency of this research is increasing because even though the new Independent Learning policy has only begun to be widely implemented since 2024, many schools have not yet fully implemented contextual learning systematically [5]. Challenges such as teacher readiness, resistance to change, and limited resources are still real obstacles [6]. Furthermore, Potokri and Lumadi [7] emphasized that in areas with conservative social environments, the implementation of CTL is most effective when teachers use a humanistic approach and utilize the students' local context as a learning medium. This aligns with Dewey's ideas about learning through experiences that are close to students' real lives. The mismatch between learning practices in many schools that are still dominated by memorization and test-based teaching with the vision of Merdeka Belajar and the CTL model shows a gap that needs to be bridged [8]. Therefore, reflection on the relevance of Dewey's thinking is very important.

Through a conceptual study, research by Maroungkas et al. [9] highlights the relevance of Dewey's constructivism theory in the context of the Independent Curriculum, where students actively create knowledge through interactions with real-world environments and self-reflection. This principle directly supports innovative and student-centered learning [10]. This research is urgent because it provides a theoretical and practical foundation for developing learning strategies in the Merdeka Belajar era. By referring to Dewey's thinking, teachers and policymakers can design learning that aligns with the principles of freedom to learn while still meeting established learning outcomes. Thus, this study will explore the extent to which Dewey's progressivism educational values are still relevant in Indonesian education today—how the integration of the principles of experience, reflection, collaboration, and local context can strengthen the implementation of contextual learning in achieving the goals of Freedom to Learn.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach utilizing library research to examine the relevance of John Dewey's educational philosophy to contextual learning within the framework of Indonesia's Independent Curriculum. Rather than relying on empirical fieldwork, the study is grounded in the analysis of secondary data derived from authoritative sources, including John Dewey's seminal works (*Democracy and Education*, 1916; *Experience and Education*, 1938), official educational policy documents issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, peer-reviewed scholarly publications on contextual learning and progressive education, and institutional reports detailing the documented implementation of the Independent Curriculum in selected schools such as SMAN 10 Ternate, SDN Tomagoba Tidore, and SLB Sofifi. Data were collected through an extensive review of literature sourced from accredited national repositories, international databases such as Scopus, and official educational archives, with inclusion criteria based on relevance to the research topic, recency (with priority given to publications from the last 5–10 years, except for Dewey's foundational texts), and credibility of sources.

The collected data were analyzed using content analysis, which involved reducing and organizing relevant information, categorizing it into thematic areas such as experiential learning (*learning by doing*), social engagement in education, and alignment with curriculum reform, and synthesizing these themes to draw conclusions about the practical implications of Dewey's philosophy for contemporary Indonesian education [11]. To ensure the validity of the findings, source triangulation was applied by cross-

referencing data from multiple reliable sources, thereby strengthening interpretive consistency and ensuring that the conclusions are both logically coherent and firmly grounded in documented evidence.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Result

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in various regions of Indonesia has provided a breath of fresh air for more contextual and student-oriented learning practices. In line with John Dewey's thinking, which emphasized the importance of direct experience and the social environment as primary sources of learning, various schools have begun designing learning based on students' social realities. The emphasis on "learning by doing," as explained by Makransky and Mayer [12], has become a principle evident in curriculum development and learning development in the field. One example of a practice reflecting Dewey's ideas can be found at SMAN 10 Ternate, North Maluku Province. This school pioneered the implementation of the Independent Curriculum. Teachers are given the freedom to develop materials and learning models appropriate to the local context, including addressing social and cultural issues in the Ternate community. Learning activities are not solely textbook-centered but also involve projects based on students' real-life experiences in their surroundings. This aligns with Dewey's principle that education should stem from real life and provide students with opportunities for direct experience [13].

This implementation not only increases student motivation but also makes learning more meaningful and relevant [14]. Public enthusiasm is evident in the increasing number of new student enrollments, leading the school to add two new classes in the 2023 academic year. This phenomenon demonstrates that when education is contextual and rooted in the realities of students, community participation increases (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023). Meanwhile, Tomagoba Public Elementary School in Tidore Islands City implements a contextual learning approach by integrating local cultural values into learning materials. Support from the North Maluku Education Quality Assurance Center (BPMP) has strengthened the school's and teachers' readiness to develop an adaptive operational curriculum. Teachers at this school have the freedom to design learning modules tailored to students' social and cultural backgrounds. This practice demonstrates the alignment between the principles of Dewey's progressivism and the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes meaningful and participatory learning.

At the special education level, the Sofifi State Special Needs School (SLB) in Tidore City demonstrates a concrete example of the application of contextual learning with a differentiated approach. Teaching modules are developed based on student ability classifications, including addressing the needs of children with special needs (ABK) based on their IQ. Teachers develop project-based learning that allows students to practice hands-on life skills, such as gardening, sewing, or managing the school cafeteria. This approach emphasizes the importance of responsive learning design to each student's unique experiences—a central tenet of Dewey's thinking. These three schools demonstrate how John Dewey's progressive educational principles can be effectively implemented in the contemporary Indonesian educational context. In practice, the Independent Curriculum provides ample space for teachers and schools to become the primary designers of the learning process, not simply implementers of a uniform curriculum [15].

The importance of local social and cultural context in learning is also evident in the way teachers relate subject topics to students' daily lives. At SMAN 10 Ternate, for example, sociology lessons are linked to the practice of deliberation in the local community. Meanwhile, at SDN Tomagoba, Indonesian language lessons begin with descriptions of typical Tidore landmarks, such as Tahula Fort and local fishing activities. This reflects Dewey's spirit of viewing schools as miniatures of society, where students can experience, evaluate, and understand social realities directly through learning [16]. Data from observations and literature studies show that when teachers are given autonomy in designing curriculum and instruction, they tend to produce pedagogical innovations that align with the needs and potential of their students. In this context, teacher autonomy is not merely technical freedom, but a form of professionalism in translating educational philosophy into practice [17].

The study also showed that this contextual approach can increase student engagement. At SLB Sofifi, for example, students demonstrated significant improvements in basic skills such as social communication and independence in completing practical tasks. This strengthens the argument that authentic learning experiences are more effective than simply transmitting knowledge. This finding aligns with Asad et al. [18] study in the *Journal of Progressive Education*, which states that experiential learning has a positive impact on students' critical thinking and affective skills. Field practice demonstrates that John Dewey's thinking remains highly relevant and contextual in today's Indonesian education system [19]. The Independent Curriculum provides a space and framework that allows Dewey's philosophical principles, such as experiential learning, social collaboration, and reflection, to become a tangible part of classrooms across Indonesia, including in regions like North Maluku. This relevance is a strong reason why Dewey's ideas need to continue to be introduced into teacher education and national education policy. The integration of local values, students' lived experiences, and teachers' professional autonomy is a promising combination for creating education that is not only informative but also transformative.

3.2 Discussion

Contextual learning in the Independent Curriculum strongly correlates with the progressive education ideas introduced by John Dewey. According to Dewey, meaningful education is rooted in students' real-life experiences and relevant to their social lives. This is reflected in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in several schools in North Maluku, such as SMAN 10 Ternate City, SDN Tomagoba Tidore Kepulauan, and SLB Centra PK-LK Negeri Sofifi. At SMAN 10 Ternate, for example, teachers are given the freedom to design teaching materials based on students' social realities. This model allows students to develop critical, collaborative, and creative thinking skills through projects based on local issues, which aligns with Dewey's "learning by doing" principle [20].

At SDN Tomagoba, teachers are trained to develop an operational curriculum that takes into account the cultural context of the local community, making learning more meaningful and easier for students to understand. This demonstrates that when teachers are given the autonomy to develop instruction tailored to students' needs and backgrounds, the learning process becomes more effective and humanistic. Meanwhile, at SLB Sofifi Tidore, the learning approach is tailored to the IQ of each student with special needs. Teaching modules are developed to enable students to learn through concrete experiences, such as life skills activities and environmental exploration, reflecting Dewey's philosophy of inclusive and participatory education.

Concrete evidence from the field study is reinforced by observational data and reports from the North Maluku BPMP, which show increased student learning motivation and teacher participation in developing locally context-based teaching modules. In fact, at SMAN 10 Ternate, there was a recorded increase in the number of new enrollees following the full implementation of the Independent Curriculum in 2023. This situation demonstrates that contextual learning not only improves the quality of the learning process but also builds public trust in educational institutions. Other educational theories, such as Vygotsky's constructivism, also reinforce that learning is optimal when carried out in a supportive and collaborative social environment, as evident in the project-based learning and problem-based learning models implemented.

Furthermore, practices in these schools demonstrate a close relationship with Carl Rogers' humanistic educational principles, which place students at the center of learning, and Paulo Freire's approach, which emphasizes critical awareness and dialogue between teachers and students. Through the Independent Curriculum, students are encouraged to actively construct their own knowledge, rather than simply becoming objects of knowledge transfer. However, several challenges were also encountered, particularly regarding teachers' capacity to develop context-based teaching modules. Therefore, institutional support in the form of training and mentoring from the BPMP and the education office is crucial to ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of this curriculum's implementation.

Thus, the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in North Maluku can be seen as a concrete demonstration of the successful integration of Dewey's progressive educational theory into national policy practice. This demonstrates that an educational philosophy that places experience and context as the foundation of learning can improve the quality and relevance of education, both in regular and inclusive schools. Therefore, strengthening the teacher training system based on this educational philosophy, providing ongoing policy support, and conducting further research based on empirical data is necessary to ensure that contextual learning continues to develop and address the challenges of 21st-century education.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm the strong relevance of John Dewey's educational philosophy to the contextual learning approach embedded in the Independent Curriculum. Dewey's emphasis on real-life experiences, social engagement, and learner autonomy is clearly reflected in documented practices from schools in North Maluku, demonstrating tangible benefits such as increased student motivation, participation, and comprehension. These results highlight that Dewey's progressive ideas extend beyond theory and offer practical solutions to contemporary educational challenges. Accordingly, integrating his principles into national education policies, supported by sustained teacher training and policy reinforcement, is essential to advancing a more democratic, contextual, and transformative educational model in Indonesia.

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6. Declaration

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