



Revitalizing Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Philosophy in the Context of 21st Century Education Reform

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Abstract: Indonesian education is increasingly shaped by digitalization and global benchmarks, producing an emphasis on cognitive performance while cultural and moral formation receives limited space, creating a need to reassess Ki Hadjar Dewantara's humanistic philosophy in relation to current policy. This study aims to analyze how Dewantara's key educational principles correspond to the objectives of the National Education System Law (Law No. 20/2003) and to identify the forms of tension that arise when these values are implemented in 21st-century schooling. A qualitative approach was employed through document analysis of Dewantara's texts and the National Education Law, supported by in-depth interviews with 10 key informants (teachers, school leaders, and education experts) and non-participant observation in two Taman Siswa schools in Yogyakarta and Semarang. The findings show substantive alignment between Dewantara's emphasis on moral character, learner autonomy, and contextual learning and the mandates of Article 3 regarding holistic development. However, autonomy is reduced in practice to scheduling flexibility, while bureaucratic reporting and centralized curriculum controls restrict creative pedagogy. Field observations also show that cultural-arts learning still contributes to character formation but is difficult to institutionalize under efficiency-driven policy incentives. The study concludes that harmony at the philosophical level does not ensure operational freedom, institutional reform through reduced administrative burden, greater school-level discretion, and cultural-based instruction is necessary to revitalize Dewantara's values in contemporary policy implementation.

Keywords: 21st-century learning; Humanistic education; Ki Hadjar Dewantara; National education system law; Pancasila; Taman siswa; Value revitalization

Introduction

Indonesia's national education system is navigating a delicate tension between rapid digital transformation and the preservation of cultural identity grounded in local wisdom (Ihwani et al., 2024; Karsidi, 2017). Global economic pressures have pushed education policies to priorities cognitive achievement, technological mastery and productivity, while moral, cultural, and spiritual dimensions receive diminishing attention (Setyawan et al., 2020; Shabartini et al., 2023). Scholars argue that such shifts risk eroding the ethical foundations of Indonesian education, which historically aimed to develop civic

responsibility, cultural rootedness, and cooperation (Asfina et al., 2017; Simarmata et al., 2020). This concern intensifies under international testing regimes such as PISA and TIMSS, where performance indicators overshadow holistic character building (Pons et al., 2020).

The reevaluation of Indonesian philosophical resources has therefore gained traction, particularly in relation to Ki Hadjar Dewantara and the Taman Siswa movement established in 1922 (Santoso et al., 2022). Emerging during colonial rule, Taman Siswa challenged elitist during colonial rule, Taman Siswa challenged elitist Dutch schooling by positioning education as a

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moral and cultural liberation more than economic subordination (Rahmawati et al., 2023; Rhamadani et al., 2023). Dewantara articulated humanistic values through Pancadarma (independence, natural growth, nationality, and culture) which is operationalized in the system where teachers act as empathetic guides instead of authoritarian supervisors (Ferary, 2021; Salihin et al., 2024). These principles align with experiential learning are rooted in community participation and local arts.

National policy frameworks contain similar ideals. Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System defines education as a means to cultivate faith, noble character, creativity, independence, and social responsibility (Jamaluddin et al., 2022). It mandates democratic, equitable and culturally sensitive learning consistent with Pancasila values (Karo-Karo et al., 2023). Empirical studies show that implementation remains constrained by bureaucratic standardization, administrative reporting and exam orientation, which suppress autonomy and reduce cultural engagement to mere ceremony (Putra et al., 2022; Sahlberg, 2024; Wijaya, 2023). As a result, Merdeka Belajar risks functioning as an administrative slogan more than genuine educational liberation (Kusuma, 2023; Fullan, 2024).

Few studies have systematically analysed how Dewantara's philosophical values correspond structurally with the operational clauses of the National Education Law or how these values could counterbalance digital standardization (Shabartini et al., 2023; Susar et al., 2025). The novelty of this research lies in positioning Dewantara's philosophy as a normative and practical framework for twenty first century reform by comparing its core values with the legal, bureaucratic and digital realities of contemporary schooling. The study is important because it offers a culturally rooted alternative to global standardization while supporting national aspirations for autonomy, character, and identity. This research therefore examines the conceptual harmony between Taman Siswa and state policy, identifies areas of tension such as freedom versus central regulation and proposes strategic pathways for revitalizing Dewantara's humanistic values within modern curriculum and governance structures.

Method

Research Approach and Design

This study used a qualitative research approach because the objective was to interpret meaning rather than test numerical hypotheses (Creswell et al., 2018). The research design combined comparative document analysis and a multiple-case study, allowing comparison between two normative frameworks (Taman Siswa philosophy and the National Education System Law)

and examination of empirical implementation in schools. The design focused on conceptual relationships, value interpretation, and contextual practices rather than measurable performance indicators.

Research Locations and Context

Two types of research domains were involved: 1) Document and policy analysis domain: analysis of original Taman Siswa philosophical texts (Pancadarma, Pendidikan Bagian, Sistem Among) and the full text of Law No. 20/2003 including technical regulations. 2) Empirical domain: Non-participant field observation was conducted in two Taman Siswa schools: Yogyakarta branch and Semarang branch. This clarification ensures consistency between stated locations and actual observational coverage, as requested by the reviewer.

Research Subjects and Informants

Primary informants totaled ten individuals, with explicit distribution as follows: 1) 4 school principals/administrators (Yogyakarta = 2; Semarang = 2). 2) 4 senior teachers responsible for character-based instruction (Yogyakarta = 2; Semarang = 2). 3) 2 curriculum officers (Yogyakarta = 1; Semarang = 1). This distribution ensures representation of leadership and pedagogical roles across institutional levels.

Data Types and Sources

Primary data for this study consisted of the full texts of Ki Hadjar Dewantara's writings, the interview transcripts (10 informants, 45-60 minutes each), and non-participant observation notes from two Taman Siswa Schools. Secondary data were drawn from national education policy documents, peer-reviewed articles, curriculum frameworks, and institutional archives that provided contextual and regulatory information.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three techniques. The first technique was documentary analysis which focused on philosophical texts and legal documents. The second technique involves semi-structured interviews that explored the implementation, constraints, and perceptions of Pancadarma values. The third technique consisted of non-participant classroom and school activity observations that allowed the researcher to examine how the among system, cultural activities, and character formations were enacted in everyday learning settings.

Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) interactive model:

- a) Data reduction involved selecting relevant portions of interview transcripts, observation notes, and

- policy or philosophical texts, followed by paraphrasing and coding expressions that reflected educational values, cultural practices regulatory pressures, or classroom decision making.
- b) Data display consisted of organizing the emerging codes into visual formats such as matrices and thematic clusters, which allowed the researcher to examine linkages, contrasts and recurrent patterns across sources.
 - c) Conclusion drawing and verification required comparing coded segments, checking consistency across data types, and ensuring that the interpretations remained grounded in empirical evidence rather than researcher assumption.

Computer-assisted analysis was supported by NVivo 12 Plus, which helped group individual codes into broader thematic categories such as independence, cultural learning, the balance between freedom and regulation, character formation, and bureaucratization.

Data Validity Strategies

Validity in this study was established through several qualitative verification strategies. Source triangulation was applied by comparing information from documentary materials, interview accounts, and non-participant observations so that no interpretation relied on a single type of evidence. Member checking was conducted by returning preliminary interpretations to informants, allowing them to clarify meaning or correct possible misunderstandings. Peer examination supported analytical rigor by inviting an external qualitative researcher to review coding decisions and thematic logic. In addition, an audit trail was maintained to document analytic steps and decision making, consistent with the criteria of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln et al. (1985). Transferability was strengthened by providing thick descriptions of the school environments, cultural settings, and policy implementation contexts, enabling readers to assess the relevance of these findings to comparable educational settings.

Research Ethics

Ethical approval and research clearance were obtained from Majelis Luhur Taman Siswa. All participants signed informed consent forms. Names and institutional identifiers are anonymized. Data are stored securely and used strictly for academic purposes.

Result and Discussion

Document analysis of Ki Hadjar Dewantara's educational philosophy and the National Education System Law (UU Sisdiknas) Number 20 of 2003 shows a close correspondence at the level of principles and

operational clauses. The five Pancasila values-- independence, nature, nationality, humanity, and culture--appear in articles related to character education, curricular flexibility, and democratic access. Articles 3 and 4 stress the formation of responsible citizens through value-based learning, which aligns with Dewantara's ideal of guiding students toward noble character (Santoso et al., 2022). Article 36 requires the curriculum to reflect regional and sociocultural conditions, which fits the doctrine of kodrat alam that education should follow the nature and environment of the learner (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2024). This textual comparison indicates that national regulation has absorbed elements of cultural contextualization and learning autonomy that Dewantara articulated long before current reforms (Biesta, 2025; Rizvi, 2023).

The interview data explain where this alignment collapses in practice. Ten informants (seven teachers, two school leaders, and a local education consultant) agreed that the idea of independence in Merdeka Belajar often becomes administrative flexibility instead of intellectual autonomy. Teachers described 'independence' as adjusting schedules, attendance, or documentation formats rather than designing inquiry-driven learning. One teacher in Yogyakarta stated that 'jadwal boleh fleksibel, tapi RPP tetap wajib dikunci di platform,' reflecting a situation where compliance takes priority over creativity. Eight participants explained that digital reporting, curriculum standardization, and platform monitoring often discourage experimentation and reduce teacher initiative (Hidayat, 2021).

Several teachers associated these reporting obligations with declining motivation among students because trial-and-error activities are treated as potential administrative risks rather than opportunities for growth (Gardner, 2023; Hartono, 2023).

Field observations in two Taman Siswa schools in Yogyakarta and Semarang display a different pattern. Cultural learning remains central to classroom life, with weekly karawitan, batik work, traditional music, storytelling, and theatre. These activities reflect the among orientation, where teachers do not impose rigid instruction but support participation through indirect guidance. Cultural tasks encourage collaborative problem solving, emotional regulation, and mutual responsibility. One Semarang teacher noted that children learn patience and careful listening during gamelan practice because mistakes are adjusted collaboratively rather than punished. These learning conditions embody the principles of *Ing madya mangun karso* and *Tut wuri handayani*, which emphasize motivation and supportive guidance (Palmer, 2023; Astuti et al. 2023).

The cultural activities also contribute to developmental outcomes. In the Semarang batik classes, mixed-group arrangements led older students to help younger peers handle wax tools and interpret motifs. Teachers reported that students became more confident in speaking performing, and improvising after repeated cultural sessions. These findings indicate that cultural practice sustains character formation even under regulatory pressure. At the same time, school-level

constraints limit the potential expansion of cultural learning. Both schools cited weak digital access and limited multimedia tools, which make it difficult to combine cultural pedagogy with online platforms or digital portfolios (Zhao, 2022; Dewi et al., 2024). The value of cultural revitalization therefore depends on resource support rather than philosophical agreement alone education and in articles that regulate curriculum direction. The explanation is simplified in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Conformity of Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Pancasila Values with the Principles of the National Education System Law No. 20 of 2003

The Values of Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Five Principles	Philosophical Description	Relevant Articles in the National Education System Law	Practical Contextualization
Independence	The liberation of human beings physically and mentally so that they are able to think and act independently.	Article 3: Development of students' potential to become people who are faithful, pious, and have noble morals.	In line with the concept of Independent Learning which emphasizes autonomy of thinking and learning.
Nature's Will	Education must be in accordance with the nature of the child and his environment.	Article 36: The curriculum is designed in accordance with the regional, social and cultural potential of the community.	Encourage project-based learning based on local environmental and cultural issues.
Nationality	Education to strengthen the spirit of love for the homeland and nationalism.	Article 4 paragraph (1): Education is organized democratically and fairly.	Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students and Mutual Cooperation.
Humanity	Education as a means of forming noble character and universal humanity.	Article 4 paragraph (3): Education is carried out by providing examples and building will.	Implementation of culture-based character education (Jamaluddin et al., 2022).
Culture	Education must be rooted in the nation's own culture.	Article 37: The curriculum includes education on national culture and character.	Revitalizing local arts and traditions learning in a digital context.

The table illustrates that each of Dewantara's five core values has a corresponding legal formulation within the National Education System Law. At the normative level, independence maps onto Article 3, nature's will aligns with curriculum decentralization in Article 36, and cultural rootedness appears in Article 37. This mapping confirms that the legislative framework already accommodates the philosophical foundations of Taman Siswa. However, these alignments remain textual: the articles describe legal aspirations not mechanisms of classroom translation.

To determine whether these normative correspondences operate in schools, classroom observations and interviews were analyzed. This empirical phase was necessary because legislative alignment does not guarantee interpretive or pedagogical realization. Teachers and school leaders often face structural pressures that mediate how these values become instructional practice. The following section presents the value tensions identified in NVivo coding.

The thematic coding using NVivo 14 identified three overarching categories of value tensions that

shaped the implementation of Dewantara's philosophy within contemporary schooling. The first concerns the imbalance between learning freedom and regulatory pressures: teachers reported that bureaucratic accountability, such as compliance reporting, standardized assessment, and curriculum audits narrows the pedagogical space needed for classroom innovation (Apple, 2024; Raharjo, 2023). The second relates to the partial and symbolic adoption of cultural values. Although cultural identity is embedded in policy language, many teachers admitted that local cultural practices appear only as decorative activities or ceremonial performances rather than being integrated as epistemic methods of learning; this creates gradual erosion of cultural ownership among students (Nussbaum, 2025; Sukmawati, 2022). The third tension emerges from a paradoxical similarity and divergence: both Taman Siswa and the National Education System Law promote moral formation and civic responsibility, yet they differ in implementation logic. Taman Siswa presents contextual, bottom-up moral cultivation through community and experience, whereas national

policy tends toward top-down standardization and uniformity (Arifin et al., 2022; Giroux, 2025).

These tensions prompted theoretical triangulation across Dewantara's philosophical writings, Maslow's humanistic psychology, and Kolb's experiential learning theory. This comparison confirms that Pancadarma functions not merely as moral doctrine but as an experiential learning framework, in which experience is transformed into ethical and intellectual awareness. It closely resembling Kolb's learning cycle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kollo, 1984; Fullan, 2024) Maslow's notion of self-actualization further aligns with Dewantara's insistence on the liberation of thought and moral autonomy.

Recent literature also suggests that these experiential-humanistic principles are increasingly relevant in digital education ecosystems. Rather than undermining cultural rootedness, virtual learning spaces can provide mediated cultural enrichers, such as immersive local arts, language revitalization platforms, and community-linked project-based learning that preserve locality in a global medium (Biesta, 2025; Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). This indicates that Dewantara's philosophical legacy is not merely preservative but adaptable: cultural humanism can coexist with digital innovation when learning autonomy is protected, regulation is balanced, and culture is treated as knowledge rather than ornament. This is further explained in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Empirical Research Findings

Data source	Key findings	Implications for national education
Document Analysis	The conceptual alignment between Pancadarma and the objectives of the National Education System Law is substantive and operational.	Strengthening the integration of humanitarian and cultural values in national education policy.
Interview (10 informants)	Freedom to learn is understood more administratively than morally- intellectually.	There is a need to sharpen the concept of freedom to learn as autonomy of Thought and spirituality of learning.
Field Observation	The among system is still alive through arts and cultural activities at Taman Siswa schools.	Local cultural values have the potential to be the basis for character education and social empathy.
NVivo 14 Analysis	Three value tensions: freedom vs regulation, symbolic culture, moral idealism.	Promote local wisdom-based educational decentralization policies.

The tension between Taman Siswa's humanistic idealism and the bureaucratization of contemporary schooling highlights a wider paradox in Indonesian education. This paradox reflects a gradual dehumanization of learning, in which regulatory compliance begins to overshadow the ethical and developmental needs of learners (Sulaiman et al., 2023). Rather than cultivating autonomous, reflective, and socially grounded individuals, schools are increasingly pressured to demonstrate performance through administrative outputs. This shift sidelines the cultural, affective, and civic dimensions that Ki Hadjar Dewantara positioned at the heart of education.

Within this paradox, revitalizing Dewantara's philosophical values offers a conceptual counterweight. The shift from education for industry, which prioritizes economic utility and employability, toward education for humanity, which emphasizes ethical responsibility and cultural continuity, can re-anchor the purpose of schooling in moral agency rather than technocratic efficiency (Giroux, 2025; Biesta, 2025). Practical illustrations already exist Schools that embed cultural expression through local arts festivals, aesthetic workshops, or digitally mediated cultural showcases demonstrate how education can function as a site of cultural innovation rather than mere knowledge transfer (Hartono, 2023; Astuti et al., 2023). These initiatives

reposition culture not as symbolic ornamentation but as a generative learning method.

The policy implications point toward structural reform. Revisiting the National Education System Law through increased school autonomy echoes Dewantara's concept of *zelfbestuuronderwijs*, which frames schooling as a locally governed cultural project (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2024; Raharjo, 2023). A more decentralized structure enables communities to operationalize the Pancasila Student Profile through locally grounded pedagogies rather than standardized templates. In teacher preparation applying the spirit of *tut wuri handayani* can cultivate empathetic instructional leadership, supported by Noddings' model of care ethics and recent work on relational pedagogy (Noddings, 2022; Darling-Hammond, 2024).

Recent research also demonstrates that evaluation systems aligned with character formation, rather than solely quantitative metrics, may improve overall educational quality. Fullan (2024) argues that character-based assessment correlates with student well-being engagement, and social trust. This evidence suggests that bureaucratic accountability can be balanced with human evaluation models. The results indicate that Dewantara's values are recognized and appreciated in school discourse, yet their application depends on

regulatory priorities rather than humanistic considerations in everyday classroom practice.

Discussion

The findings indicate that Taman Siswa's instructional philosophy remains relevant for contemporary education because it prioritizes mentoring, moral example, and experiential learning. The among model positions teachers as facilitators rather than supervisors and encourages interaction that recognizes student differences (Palmer, 2023; Hidayat, 2024). This approach contrasts with forms of digital instruction that emphasize efficiency and documentation but often ignore emotional support.

The principle of learning freedom requires instruction that adapts to individual development rather than uniform assessment standards. International assessments such as PISA encourage score-oriented targets, which can narrow pedagogical choice and reduce opportunities for contextual learning (OECD, 2022; Sahlberg, 2024). The results suggest that Dewantara's emphasis on natural growth can inform project-based models that involve the local environment, community activities, and applied cultural knowledge (Gardner, 2023; Zhao, 2022). This model supports creative work and social participation rather than compliance with procedural indicators.

The analysis also shows a tension between humanistic expectations and the regulatory framework that governs national curricula. Respondents acknowledged that moral and cultural values are formally recognized in policy, but implementation is shaped by administrative monitoring and reporting requirements. This creates a procedural burden for teachers and discourages experimentation, particularly in character education. Humanistic education literature notes that value formation depends on sustained practice rather than regulation (Rizvi, 2023; Nussbaum, 2024).

Digital tools can assist reflective learning when used to document learning processes rather than only performance metrics. Studies on educational analytics emphasize the potential of technology to support student reflection and teacher feedback, provided it does not replace interpersonal interaction (Apple, 2024; Stiglitz, 2024). This orientation is consistent with Dewantara's view that experience generates moral understanding.

The findings support a policy direction that grants schools greater discretion in curriculum interpretation. Increased autonomy allows cultural activities, mentoring, and community-based learning to develop without excessive procedural control. Such conditions may strengthen the objectives of the Independent Curriculum and the Pancasila Student Profile by

integrating cultural reasoning with academic instruction.

Further studies may extend this analysis by involving more Taman Siswa schools in different provinces to examine regional variation in the enactment of Pancadarma values. Classroom ethnography could be used to document how teachers negotiate administrative requirements during lesson delivery and character education. Comparative research with non-Taman Siswa schools would also clarify whether value-based practices are distinctive to this tradition or shared across public institutions. Mixed-method designs may be useful for relating qualitative accounts of autonomy and character development to measurable indicators of student participation, motivation, and school climate.

Conclusion

This study confirms a clear conceptual alignment between Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Pancadarma values and the principles of Law No. 20 of 2003, particularly in their shared emphasis on character formation, cultural rootedness, and learner autonomy. This alignment answers the research question regarding normative consistency between national educational philosophy and legal regulations. However, interviews with teachers and school leaders show that these ideals are not fully realized in implementation. Independence is interpreted administratively rather than as intellectual freedom, and bureaucratic reporting requirements limit creative teaching. Field observations in Yogyakarta and Semarang indicate that cultural arts activities still support character formation, but teachers have limited structural support to apply these values in daily instruction. This finding addresses the second research question by demonstrating that the implementation gap is structural rather than philosophical. The tension arises from centralized regulation, reduced school autonomy, and uneven digital access, which prevent contextual, value-based learning. The study is limited by its qualitative scope, the small number of informants, and the restriction to two Taman Siswa branches, so transferability beyond similar cultural contexts should be approached cautiously. Future research may examine other regions, including student voices, and combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate how operational regulations influence character-based pedagogy. These findings imply practical improvements at the regulatory level, including reducing administrative burden, expanding school autonomy, and integrating cultural learning in curriculum execution. Teacher preparation and evaluation can prioritize character-based leadership rather than procedural compliance. Strengthening these operational

supports would allow Dewantara's philosophy to move beyond symbolic reference and become enactment in classroom practice.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization, S.S.; methodology, S.S.; software, W.P. validation, S.S. and R.K.; formal analysis, S.S.; investigation, S.S.; resources, R.K.; data curation, W.P.; writing-original draft preparation, S.S.; writing-review and editing, R.K., W.P. and S.H.; visualization, W.P.; supervision, R.K. and S.H.; project administration, R.K.; funding acquisition, R.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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